Agritourism: Development and Research

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Agricultural landscape and activities associated with it are rapidly evolving in the United States and around the globe as farmers are aggressively applying their resourcefulness and determination to meet the demands of a changing marketplace. No longer sustained by the sale of traditional crops and livestock that have provided a flat net income for the past 30 years, farmers have become entrepreneurs, generating additional income from second jobs known as "off-farm activities," which have been estimated to comprise about 75% of farm income [1]. Of these activities, diversification into tourism has been one of the most prevalent due to both the perceived extra benefits of working from home while being able to take care of children and the possibility of generating extra income [2]. Thus, for many farmers, agritourism is the favored way to reduce the need for a second job away from home. It has been reported that farmers who have turned to agritourism could be as much as 40 percent more profitable than those who have not although not all of them have been successful [3]. In three states that track the economic impact of agritourism, the annual agritourism revenue ranged from $20 million in Vermont to $34 million, from 2000 to 2003.

As such, the primary reason for the recent emergence of tourism as an important rural economic activity can be found from the supply side. Farm-based tourism can give farmers an opportunity to generate additional income [4] and to be an avenue for direct marketing of the farm products to consumers [5,6]. Tourism can also help counteract social and economic problems of the farms (loss of income, increased expenses, globalization, and others) associated with the decline of traditional agriculture industries [7]. While the financial advantages with respect to employment and wages are clear, agritourism development can also enhance the local quality of life. It can serve as an important source of tax revenues, which may lead to higher public services and lower local tax rates. Tourism can also support conservation of local culture and traditions, helping to maintain the viability of small-scale agriculture [6].

However, the recent popularity of agritourism could not have occurred without market demand. Discretionary income and demand for more specialized forms of vacation experiences juxtaposed with reduced transportation costs have driven the growth of tourism and recreational activity in a farming environment [8]. Agritourism also meets the needs of urban tourists who seek traditional hospitality, nature and cultural experiences, peace and tranquility, thematic holidays, authenticity, healthfulness, and so on [9]. These drivers, in combination with better access to rural destinations, have made agritourism popular for a growing number of farmers, the farming community, and the tourism industry.

Overall, rural tourism, where agritourism is a subset [10,11], experienced an annual growth rate of 6% in North America as well as Europe from 2002 to 2004 [12]. According to one nationwide study, 62 million Americans visited farms one or more times in 2000, which corresponds to almost 30% of the population [13]. In sum, agritourism has been commonly guided and motivated by a vision of a thriving, viable agriculture that has a diversity of small-scale farms that remain profitable, enhance the environment, enrich the indigenous culture, and improve the quality of life for farmers, tourists, and consumers. With the recent popularity of agritourism in practice, a body of literature has recently been growing to support the professional practice and the academic study of agritourism.

Yet, agritourism research still needs a framework for systematically studying and creating knowledge. This research framework can be useful for both practitioners and academicians shaping their overall understanding and approach to agritourism. This editorial suggests the three broad research dimensions generally adopted in tourism (Gunn, 1994): the demand side, supply side, and impacts and the implications. Research on the demand side agritourism can encompass the volume and characteristics of agritourists; their perceptions, motivations, preferences, decision-making processes, and behavior; and the factors affecting these. For the supply side of agritourism research, the topic can include the role and importance of infrastructure, service, and organizations (e.g., transport, attractions, accommodation, intermediaries, coordinators, etc.) that facilitate agritourist activities. Finally, agritourism research needs to be conducted to examine the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic impacts of agritourism and the management, planning, and policy implications. According to scholars, there are considerable opportunities for growth of the demand for agritourism and an increasing number of farmers are also diversifying into tourism businesses [14,15]. However, agritourism studies and related research are still in the early stage of development and there is great scope for theoretical advances. The research framework for agritourism having the three dimensions suggested above will hopefully be appropriate and necessary for creating knowledge and developing theory in agritourism.

References

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