



Defining agritourism: A comparative study of stakeholders' perceptions in Missouri and North Carolina

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Examination of the meaning of agritourism across key stakeholders.
- ▶ “Agricultural setting”, “entertainment”, “farm” and “education” are key elements.
- ▶ Agritourism include staged or authentic agricultural activities.
- ▶ Activities offered in non-working farms were rejected as agritourism.
- ▶ Agricultural settings used for background purposes were rejected as agritourism.

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism is not a recent phenomenon; furthermore, it has considerably increased in the past ten years and is projected to continue growing in the future. Despite such growth, there is not a shared understanding of agritourism which is problematic as this creates confusion and lessens its appeal among consumers, further hindering communication and collaboration among stakeholders. Therefore, a study was conducted in 2011 to identify preferred definitional elements and types of agritourism activities across residents, farmers, and extension faculty in Missouri and North Carolina (U.S.). Results showed that “agricultural setting”, “entertainment”, “farm”, and “education” should be included in a good definition of agritourism. Respondents also agreed that agritourism includes staged or authentic activities carried out on working agricultural facilities. All stakeholder groups rejected to consider activities offered in non-working farms or where the agricultural setting only serves for background purposes as agritourism. Statistical tests showed significant differences on agritourism definitional elements and types across groups, results that are further discussed. Besides advancing the understanding of the meaning of agritourism, this study carries important implications for the practice of agritourism.

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1. Introduction

Agritourism is not a new phenomenon, it has been recognized world-wide since the early twentieth century (Busby & Rendle, 2000; McKenzie & Wysocki, 2002; Wicks & Merrett, 2003). A set of policies establishing specific guidelines, obligations, and incentives to assist and encourage farmers to diversify their entrepreneurial portfolio through tourism and hospitality services fostered the development of agritourism (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005; Hegarty & Przezborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007;

Sonnino, 2004). For example, farmers from countries that are members of the European Union (E.U.) can access the LEADER program that offers grants for the promotion of rural development (Caballe, 1999; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; European Court of Auditors, 2010, p. 100). In spite of lesser government support, agritourism has also emerged as an alternative economic activity among farmers in the United States of America (U.S.), although their occurrence is not evenly distributed throughout the country. For example, the state of Texas, largely known for its dude ranches, accounts for 23% of all farms that generate revenues from agritourism, followed by Kansas and Montana with less than 5% (USDA: NASS, 2007, p. 639).

Agritourism has rapidly increased in the U.S. during the past ten years with the number of farms making at least \$25,000 from agritourism activities growing approximately 90% between 2002

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and 2007 (USDA: NASS, 2007, p. 639). Such growth is suggested to be sustained in the upcoming years, mostly because of increasing tendencies of traveling as a family, shorter travels by car, multi-activity trips, and desire to help out local farmers and communities (Carpio, Wohlgenant, & Boonsaeng, 2008; Cordell, 2008). Illustrating this growth, farms' agritourism-related revenues have two-fold increased in the state of Missouri (MO) and almost six times in the state of North Carolina (NC) between 2002 and 2007 (USDA: NASS, 2007, p. 639). In spite of such growth, there is not a standard understanding of agritourism and several definitional inconsistencies are frequently acknowledged in the literature (Carpio et al., 2008; Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001; Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010; Tew & Barbieri, 2012; Veeck, Che, & Veeck, 2006). In the U.S., such inconsistencies have been associated to the lack of legal frameworks and policies related to the development and marketing of agritourism (Carpio et al., 2008; McGehee, 2007) as opposed to other regions, such as in Europe, where agritourism definitions are legally bound to apply incentives or subsidies to their providers (Hegarty & Przezborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Sonnino, 2004).

The lack of understanding and definitional inconsistencies of agritourism is problematic for several reasons. First, it challenges the creation of policies promoting the development or strengthening of agritourism (Colton & Bissix, 2005). Second, definitional inconsistencies of agritourism hinder the development of marketing strategies (Veeck et al., 2006), which in turn diminish the effectiveness of making this activity more accessible to the public. Finally, from an academic perspective, addressing inconsistencies and aiming the development of a shared definition of agritourism can help to develop a more uniform field of study, thus enabling more specialized contributions in the future (Phillip et al., 2010).

In response to these challenges, a study was undertaken in 2011 to unveil the understanding of agritourism among three stakeholder groups: providers (i.e., Farmers), current and potential consumers (i.e., Residents), and those assisting in maximizing the farmer/visitor dynamic (i.e., Extension Faculty). Taking into consideration different stakeholders' perspectives to develop a shared understanding of agritourism can lead to a more fluent communication, collaboration, and networking among stakeholders, as well as promote local empowerment and sustainability (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Cole, 2007; Ingram, Fry, & Mathieu, 2010). A shared understanding of agritourism that embodies key stakeholders perspectives can also facilitate its promotion among the public, technical diffusion among farmers, and furthering the development of related study fields such as rural sociology and tourism (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rich, 2011).

2. Literature review

Meanings are the representations of a given activity developed by every person according to their background and experiences (Coulson, 2001, p. 320; Sharpley & Stone, 2010, p. 304). Specifically, tourism meanings are directly related to the experience itself and are the result of any natural or social contact that takes place during a given experience (Coulson, 2001, p. 320; Greer, Donnelly, & Rickly, 2008). Thus, meanings can evoke an instant appeal or rejection of a certain activity or label (Gilbert, 2003). Tourism meanings are not static; they can vary according to specific contextual factors including time and place (Greer et al., 2008). Along these lines, the context surrounding agritourism stakeholders (e.g., their roles) can shape their meaning of this activity. Identifying different meanings is important to develop successful definitions of tourism-related activities, in which case it is imperative to incorporate meanings from the supply and demand sides because of their academic and marketing implications (Gilbert, 2003). Aiming to develop

a theoretical framework for evaluating stakeholders' meanings of agritourism, the following sections deconstruct several definitions of agritourism and present a discussion of the efforts put forth by Phillip et al. (2010) to construct a broad definition of agritourism. Such deconstruction–construction effort is intended to advance the body of knowledge and provide the foundation of the practice (Henderson, Presley, & Bialeschki, 2004) of agritourism.

2.1. Deconstructing agritourism definitions

Definitions of agritourism are abundant in the literature, reflecting the ambiguity surrounding its meaning. Inconsistencies in agritourism definitions found in the literature relate to three issues: (1) the type of setting (e.g., farm, any agricultural setting); (2) the authenticity of the agricultural facility or the experience; and (3) the types of activities involved (e.g., lodging, education). A fourth ontological issue can be added related to the need of “travel” given the use of the word “tourism” (agritourism) in its label.

A major discrepancy of agritourism definitions relate to the type of setting where the activity occurs. Most studies state that agritourism must be carried out on a farm (Carpio et al., 2008; Ilbery, Bowler, Clark, Crockett, & Shaw, 1998; McKenzie & Wysocki, 2002) while fewer expand the setting to any type of agricultural setting, such as farms, ranches, nurseries, and others (e.g., Che et al., 2005; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Furthermore, some studies have even included some types of off-farm facilities, such as farmers' markets, where produce and other farm products are taken away from the agricultural production setting to be sold (Wicks & Merrett, 2003; Wilson, Thilmany, & Sullins, 2006). Inconsistencies in the type of setting may be due to the different meanings used to define agricultural establishments, especially related to “farm”. For example, farms are officially defined in the U.S. as those that generate at least \$1000 worth of revenue from the production or sale of agricultural goods (USDA, 2009), thus comprising ranches, nurseries, among similar establishments. Meanwhile, the E.U. defines a farm as an agricultural holding, meaning “economic unit under a single management engaged in agricultural production activities” and which can also engage in non-agricultural activities (OECD, 2001). Similarly, Canada defines “farm” as any operation producing crops, livestock, poultry, animal products, or any other agricultural products (Statistics Canada, 2001). Thus, all three definitions allow for a broad interpretation of what an agricultural facility includes. At this point, it is worth mentioning that “rurality” as the agritourism setting is no longer a debatable argument since academic developments in the last decade have advanced to clearly separate “agritourism” from “rural tourism” (Colton & Bissix, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; McGehee & Kim, 2004).

A second commonly found disagreement surrounds the authenticity paradigm related to the agricultural facility and to the experience offered. As for the authenticity of the facility (working vs. non-working), McGehee (2007) for instance, based her agritourism development framework in the U.S. on Weaver and Fennell (1997)'s definition which explicitly excludes activities and experiences that are developed in non-working farms because they deem necessary the commercial aspect involved in this activity. Having a “working” agricultural setting is also mentioned in various North American (Lobo et al., 1999; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson et al., 2001; Tew & Barbieri, 2012) and European (Hegarty & Przezborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Sonnino, 2004) studies, which is most likely linked to recognizing this activity as one form of farm entrepreneurial diversification (Barbieri, Mahoney, & Butler, 2008). Fewer studies in turn do not include such requirement, broadening the setting to any working or non-working agricultural facility (Carpio et al., 2008; Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005). Phillip et al. (2010) expanded the authenticity debate of agritourism by

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