



Agriculture first: Assessing European policies and scientific typologies to define authentic agritourism and differentiate it from countryside tourism



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ABSTRACT

The regulations of public and private policies for agritourism generally require that a working farm with agricultural activities be predominant over touristic ones. Specific criteria, e.g. an unaltered agricultural setting, and offers closely linked to farming, distinguish authentic agritourism from other types of rural tourism not necessarily linked to effective agricultural production activities, here called countryside tourism. Based on analyses of binding and non-binding regulations, this article provides evidence of inconsistencies in the typologies of agritourism, which were recently devised in the literature to improve practical knowledge about authentic agritourism and promote it unambiguously. Criteria related to workload, accommodation, income, and the modes through which farmers and guests interact, are decisive factors in determining the complementarity of agricultural and touristic activities. This study advances the understanding of the meaning of authentic agritourism by presenting key provider and demand characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Agritourism offers farmers the possibility of diversifying and generating additional income through touristic on-farm activities to help balance the continuously decreasing income from agricultural activities (Barbieri, Mahoney, & Butler, 2008; Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Ilbery, Bowler, Clark, Crockett, & Shaw, 1998). This enables farmers to stay on their farms and maintain cultivation of the land by increasing their operational income without altering the dominant agricultural character. The more general understanding of agritourism is that agritouristic activities should support and promote agricultural resources, traditions, activities and culture. From an agro-economic theory point of view, the development of agritourism is linked to internal and external push-and-pull factors within the framework of agro-structural change and rural area development. Agritourism, as one internal income diversification strategy, may arise due to a lack of off-farm income opportunities; it also may arise due to the farm's appropriate operational and social structures or its location in a touristic destination.

In many countries and regions agritourism has developed very successfully. In Italy over the past ten years, the National Institute of Statistics (Istat) has registered an over 60% increase in farms offering agritourism, totalling 20,900 agritourism farms (ISTAT, 2015). Two of

the most successful Italian regions are the Autonomous Province of Bozen/Bolzano-South Tyrol and Tuscany. In 2014, 356,945 guests spent 2.3 million overnights (6% and 7.5% of all guests and overnights, respectively) in the 2804 registered South Tyrolean agritourism farms (14% of all farms) (SMG, 2015). Tuscany also has a strong agritourism sector, with 4052 agritourism farms (5.4% of all farms), accounting for 575,000 guests and 3.05 million overnights (4.5% and 7.2% of all guests and overnights, respectively) (IRPET, 2012; ISTAT, 2015; Regione Toscana, 2015). In Austria 6% of all farms offer agritourism, representing 11% of all touristic beds (BMLFUW, 2015). In the Alpine regions of Germany, 20% of all farms offer agritourism (StMELF, 2015). In Bavaria, the agritouristic overnights represent 14% of all touristic overnights (StMELF, 2015). These facts are due to agritourism's complementary role as a competitive alternative offer within the tourism market with a suitable price-performance ratio, corresponding to a touristic demand for regional, authentic rural life, natural experiences, locally made agricultural products, and specific legal and financial framework conditions (favourable taxation and investment support schemes) in many European countries.

An abundant variety of papers contribute to the scientific debate on what and why a certain activity can be defined as an agritouristic activity. The scientific examination of agritourism's main elements has received significant input from Phillip, Hunter, and Blackstock (2010) presenting a typology for agritourism. Flanigan, Blackstock, and Hunter (2014) slightly modified this typology. This paper analyses and

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discusses the features of the types of agritourism defined for this typology. The purpose of this analysis is to deduce key elements and aspects of the supply and demand side that can characterise what I call an authentic agritouristic farm and activity. I argue that distinctive characteristics comprise authentic agritourism like pieces of a puzzle. The number of pieces and how they are assembled define the authenticity as well as the quality of agritourism and its related activities. The way the supply- and demand-related activities are achieved define the degree to which they are authentic agritouristic activities, or if they have more a touristic character. Distinct touristic labelling is required for offers and activities where single elements/features prove to be merely touristic, or where agritouristic elements/features are missing.

This assessment integrates the critical points of the scientific debate on the understanding of agritourism, which are mainly the criteria that define the complementarity between touristic and agritouristic activities (workload, offers, way of interaction between host and guest, etc.). This is based on examining various international and regional definitions of agritourism published by public and private authorities and umbrella associations. The focus here is on the European situation, specifically Italy, because in Italy agritourism is governed based on an interesting interplay between national and regional regulations. Furthermore, several studies acknowledge that the applied characteristics of legally binding regulations decreed by public administrations and authorities play a crucial role in avoiding inconsistencies (Carpio, Wohlgenant, & Boonsaeng, 2008; Hegarty & Przeborska, 2005; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; McGehee, 2007; Sonnino, 2004). Nevertheless, these regulations represent a source in the literature that has not yet been comprehensively examined, because the authors focussed on provider, visitor and stakeholder-related perceptions (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rozier Rich, 2013). My frequent visits and stays in agritourism locations in Europe provide a basis for profound practical and empirical knowledge about the sector. My results rectify existing, often misleading, views and conceptions on distinct types of rural tourism, and specifically on the meaning and understanding of authentic agritourism in Europe.

The underlying thesis of this paper is that authentic agritourism is a distinct concept from other types of tourism in rural areas (better called *countryside tourism*). By using “authentic agritourism”, I refer to terms used by Phillip et al. (2010: 756; “authentic agritourism”) and Flanigan et al. (2014: 399; “authentic interaction agritourism”), but use them with a different understanding. Authentic agritourism is carried out on a fully functioning working farm where the agricultural activities are predominant over the touristic ones, and where familiar and direct contact with the hosting household and its members takes place in an unaltered agricultural environment. In this context, the authentic lifestyle of a farm is important, “characterized by tight agricultural connection as its name says, local culture [and] rural lifestyles” (Ciervo, 2013: 334). This is not based on a romanticising concept of the agricultural world, but on the features of an active farm, which can practise intensive agro-industrial, organic or extensive part-time farming. An authentic farm is a typical local farm with its agricultural architectural structure and functional organisation of farming activities. Hence, the understanding of authenticity may change due to differing geopolitical contexts.

The recently published typologies and definitions do not extensively address the phenomenon of agritourism in Europe since they do not comprehensively differentiate between authentic agritourism and what I label countryside tourism. The first reason for this is insufficient consideration of the compulsory prevalence of activities dedicated to agriculture compared with the agritouristic activities, as well as the necessity to organise the complementarity between these activities. The second reason is due to a false conception of what can be considered an authentic agritouristic interaction between provider and guest. This study considers features such as the kind and extent of interactions and operations performed by farmers and their families, as well as the workload and offers provided, in order to identify an understandable

balance between the features and services, which are related to the farm and agritourism. The study shows that the current typologies confuse the features of countryside tourism with those of agritourism, and that there are several specific characteristics that go beyond the too limited criterion of ‘working farm’.

Moreover, and referring to Ciervo (2013), I argue that within rural tourism there are further types of countryside tourism: so-called commercial agritourism, which is generally characterised by specific offers of touristic comfort services and marginal agricultural activities, and open agritourism, which implies the active working involvement of the guest; both are in contrast to authentic agritourism. The aim here is to clarify this conflicting mix and adulteration of authentic agritourism, in contrast to other forms of rural tourism, which I label countryside tourism.

Ambiguity obstructs the creation of a uniform field for scientific studies and comprehensible research (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013). An incomplete, misleading picture or misunderstanding of what scientists and consumers widely acknowledge as agritourism is negative because “meanings can evoke an instant appeal or rejection of a certain activity or label” (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013: 40). This paper hypothesizes that a clear understanding based on well-defined features will significantly contribute to developing agritourism, which needs originality and authenticity to be successful in the future and accessible to the public (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013; Potočník-Slavič & Schmitz, 2013). This would lower the risk of commercial hotel-like enterprises misusing the positive image of agritourism, which is currently possible due to the ambiguous promotion and marketing of the sector on national and international markets. It would also enable more targeted financial support, create fair incentives and improve the scientific basis for research. The definition of differences, limits and thresholds is not only a requirement for identity, but also an essential requirement for selective and sharp discrimination among different offers.

Based on the intersection of quantitative and qualitative information, the key research questions are:

- What are the political intentions and goals when stakeholders define agritourism?
- What differentiates authentic agritourism from other types of rural tourism?
- Which criteria enable one to measure the prevalence of authentic agricultural activities?
- Which characteristics and conditions support the complementarity between authentic agritouristic and agricultural activities?
- What are the key characteristics of authentic agritourism and their impacts?

This paper takes a critical analyst perspective on Phillip's and Flanigan's typologies of agritourism and their relative discussion, integration and adoption in other studies. Initially, this study presents an analysis of the context starting with a summary of the key points of the scientific debate. Subsequently, the paper examines public and private agritourism policies and definitions with regard to criteria on the complementarity between agritouristic and touristic activities, considering geopolitical and sociocultural aspects. Against this background, I analyse and discuss the existing agritourism typologies in comparison with my view of authentic agritourism. To improve the terminological and conceptual understanding of rural tourism, I recapitulate the concept of authentic agritourism in contrast to other types of rural tourism, which I call countryside tourism. In the results sections, I present key elements and characteristics of authentic agritourism from the provider and demand side, and discuss their impacts on advancing the harmonisation of the definition of authentic agritourism. Finally, I outline recommendations for future research and present my conclusions. By approaching the issue from a comprehensive conceptual understanding of authentic agritourism, exploring its key characteristics and

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