

Agritourism research: a perspective article

Carla Barbieri

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to summarize the substantial descriptive, ontological and epistemological advances of agritourism research from its origins. It also envisions how agritourism spaces and research will develop in the next 75 years.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Building upon the existing literature and existing agriculture and tourism trends, this paper elucidates on the future of agritourism spaces and research.*

Findings – *Agritourism research has made substantial descriptive, ontological and epistemological advances to consolidate its scholarly significance as an object of study. Future agritourism will be a continuum ranging from ag-interpretation to ag-themed spaces. Future research efforts should address where agritourism, as a farm diversification strategy, ends along the educational–recreational continuum, and how can agritourism spaces better assist to negotiate societal growing dissonances emanated from the rural–urban gap.*

Originality/value – *This note envisions how agritourism spaces will evolve in the next 75 years, and thus the issues that future research should address, as a result of agricultural and tourism trends.*

Keywords Agritourism, Agriculture future, Agritourist

Paper type Viewpoint

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Introduction

Agritourism, defined as educational and recreational activities offered on working farms (Gil Arroyo *et al.*, 2013), has long existed globally. Over the past four decades, the offer and demand of agritourism have steadily increased, as family farms strive to boost and diversify their income and more people are seeking rural experiences (Lane, 2009). Despite such a growth, the scholarly examination of agritourism is young. This essay summarizes the advances of agritourism research to date and reflects on the agricultural and tourism forces that will shape the space and research of agritourism in the next 75 years.

Past perspectives (1980-2019)

Agritourism research started in the 1980s by describing its fundamentals through sociological and tourism approaches. Studies within rural sociology positioned agritourism as an agricultural enterprise developed to diversify farm revenues and stimulate rural development (Ilbery, 1991; Papamichael, 2003). These studies described the relationship of agritourism with other types of farm enterprises, farmers' motivations to diversify their operations and the benefits agritourism brings to the farm-household well-being. Tourism-framed studies characterized the supply and demand at local or regional levels. Most commonly, these studies focused on identifying tourists' preferences and farmers' motivations (Nickerson *et al.*, 2001). The major conclusion of these early studies was the need to recognize the agriculture and tourism intersectionality when investigating agritourism.

Following studies delved into ontological and epistemological issues that validated the significance of agritourism as an independent object of study. Ontologically, studies delimited its meaning that helped to distinguish agritourism from other forms of tourism. A

Received 7 May 2019
Revised 24 July 2019
28 August 2019
Accepted 30 August 2019

major advancement was establishing working agricultural facilities, rather than rural landscapes, as the activity setting (Gil Arroyo *et al.*, 2013). Researchers also applied different epistemologies to investigate general and specific issues related to agritourism. Feminist approaches uncovered the key role as well as unique motivations and challenges of women in agritourism (McGehee *et al.*, 2007). Utilitarian approaches, including agriculture multifunctionality, identified the mix of socio-cultural and environmental benefits that agritourism brings to farmers and society beyond economic gains (Barbieri, 2013; Gaccio *et al.*, 2018; Tew and Barbieri, 2012).

Future perspectives (2020-2095)

The evolving trends in the agriculture and tourism sectors will mark the future of agritourism. Two colliding forces will shape agriculture during the next 75 years. The steady increase of the world population along the depletion of key agricultural resources (i.e. land, water and labor) and nature disturbance (e.g. climate change) will keep challenging the production of food, fiber and energy to be more efficient and sustainable [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2017]. At the same time, other social factors (e.g. increased global mobility, emergence of food-related movements) will strengthen the demand for localized niche agriculture (Rotz and Fraser, 2015). Both forces might dichotomize the agricultural landscape, with few variations within, into factory-type lands to supply the world population needs (e.g. vertical farming, intelligent watering systems) and small-scale heritage lands that will conserve the rural cultural and natural resources (e.g. historic barns and native plants) through niche production.

Future agritourism spaces will be also defined by the refinement of two types of farm visitors. The “purposeful” – who seeks to enhance their agricultural understanding or experience through the observation of agricultural processes and participation in hands-on activities (Barbieri, 2014) – will increase their quest for more authentic and meaningful experiences. The “recreationist” – who seeks any type of recreation or hospitality service staged within an agricultural setting (Barbieri, 2014) – will grow in number as urban encroachment expands. Such distinct agritourists’ needs will create a gradient of rural spaces anchored in ag-interpretation farms and ag-themed lands. While the first ones will continue farming to preserve natural and (agri)cultural resources through education, the latter will develop in outsized entertainment destinations staged with agricultural designs. Gradually, the core of agritourism as an agriculture diversification enterprise will be lost somewhere along this continuum, as farmers move toward stewardship and entertainment developers take over vast farmlands.

The agriculture–tourism intersectionality of agritourism along the aforementioned changes in both sectors will determine key questions that future research should address. First, What will be the boundaries of agritourism? Taken that agritourism should occur in *working* agricultural facilities (Gil Arroyo *et al.*, 2013), most likely ag-themed lands will not fit in such tourism typology. A more complex issue though will be cataloging ag-interpretation farms along the educational–recreational continuum. If most of the agricultural production goes to education, preservation or recreation, will it be still agritourism? Addressing this question has major policy implications beyond the ontological debate as such classification may (dis)qualify a given farm to receive agricultural subsidies and tax benefits that may jeopardize farmland preservation. Second, How can agritourism farms maximize their privileged space to negotiate societal growing dissonances emanated from the rural–urban gap (Barbieri *et al.*, 2018)? For example, How can agritourism contribute to the cultural (e.g. gastronomy) and natural (e.g. landscapes) resources of local communities (Ainley and Kline, 2014; Contini *et al.*, 2009)? Further beyond, Can agritourism become an advocacy platform to advance social and environmental responsible farming (e.g. humane-raised initiatives and soil conservation practices)?

Conclusion

This note concludes that the substantial descriptive, ontological and epistemological developments of agritourism research in the past 20 years has consolidated its scholarly significance as an object of study. Yet, future studies need to shift directions to address emerging issues of the upcoming agritourism, composed of a mosaic of offerings falling within a continuum anchored in plain educational and recreational spaces. Of utmost importance will be to investigate *where* the core of agritourism as an agriculture diversification enterprise vanishes within such a continuum because such delimitation will have major policy implications. This note also envisions that although agritourism spaces in the next 75 years will still be suitable to foster dialogues conducive to benefiting producers and consumers and alleviating problems emanated from the rural–urban gap, future studies should place effort to identify how to maximize those societal benefits.

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