

Cultivating Local Foods Consumers: Using Agritourism to Promote Local Foods

NC STATE

EXTENSION

Introduction

Increasing the consumption of local foods can stimulate local economies and foster environmental sustainability (Sadler et al., 2015). Federal and State policies seek to increase local foods consumption to maximize these benefits, but have achieved varying levels of success (Martinez, 2016).

These mixed results call for identifying innovative and more effective approaches to promote local foods consumption. Agritourism — when working farms offer educational or recreational activities for visitors such as U-pick — has the potential to spark consumers' interest in local foods and motivate support for local agricultural products (Gil Arroyo et al., 2013).



About the Study¹

To investigate the impact of agritourism on the consumption of local foods, we surveyed 328 families before and after visiting a farm. We asked visitors specifically about their: attitudes regarding the qualities of local foods (e.g., “local foods are fresh”) and buying local foods (e.g., “buying local foods is good for the environment”); intentions to buy and to advocate for local foods; and willingness to increase their monthly budget to buy local foods. We surveyed visitors at six farms across North Carolina (NC) during fall 2018 and spring 2019, at the peak of the pumpkin and strawberry agritourism seasons. These farms offered similar activities and amenities to visitors, such as educational activities and an on-farm store.

Visitor responses were gauged using 1-to-5 scales ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5), with a “Neutral” point (3). We then used statistical *t*-tests ($p < 0.05$) to identify whether initial responses that visitors provided when they entered the farm had changed significantly by the end of their farm visit.

Study participants were predominantly women (77%) and between 30 and 49 years old (84%). The vast majority (81%) was White; a small proportion was Hispanic (6%), Asian (5%), or Black (4%). Most study participants (58%) reported annual household incomes of at least \$75,000 and 71% held at least a four-year college degree.



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Agritourism Positively Influenced Attitudes Toward Local Foods

Based on the significant changes in participants' responses before and after their agritourism experiences, we can infer that agritourism positively affects visitors' attitudes toward local foods. We observed the greatest increase on "local foods are easy to find where I shop" (Figure 1). This improvement suggests that agritourism can help increase to proactively seek local foods out during their future grocery shopping. The slight changes in visitors' perceptions related to the freshness and taste of local foods after the agritourism experience were not statistically significant.

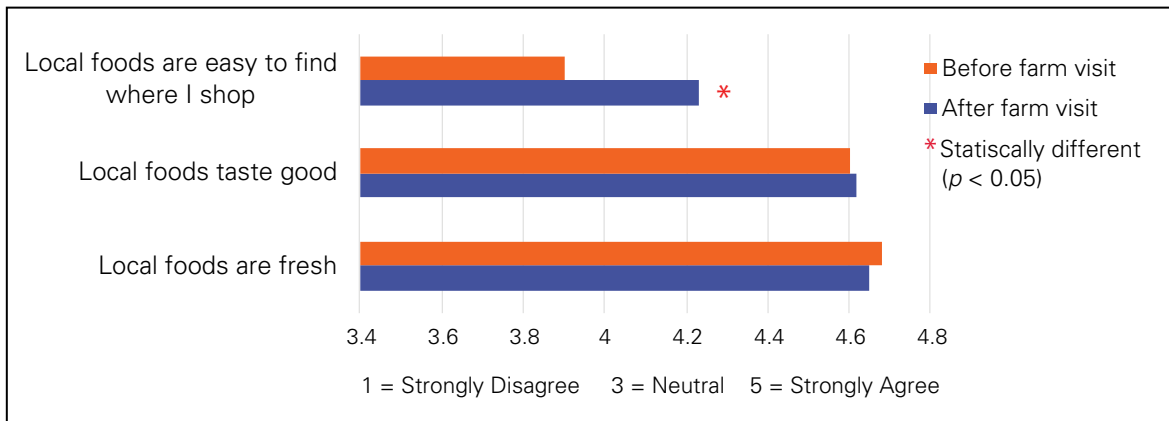


Figure 1. Change in respondents' attitudes related to the attributes of local foods.

We also found that the agritourism experiences changed how farm visitors perceived the broader effects of buying local foods (Figure 2). Among those effects, agritourism significantly increased visitors' perception that "buying local foods is good for the environment." This result highlights the contribution that visiting a farm can have on appreciating the environmental dimension of local foods, such as soil conservation and reduction of fuel consumption.

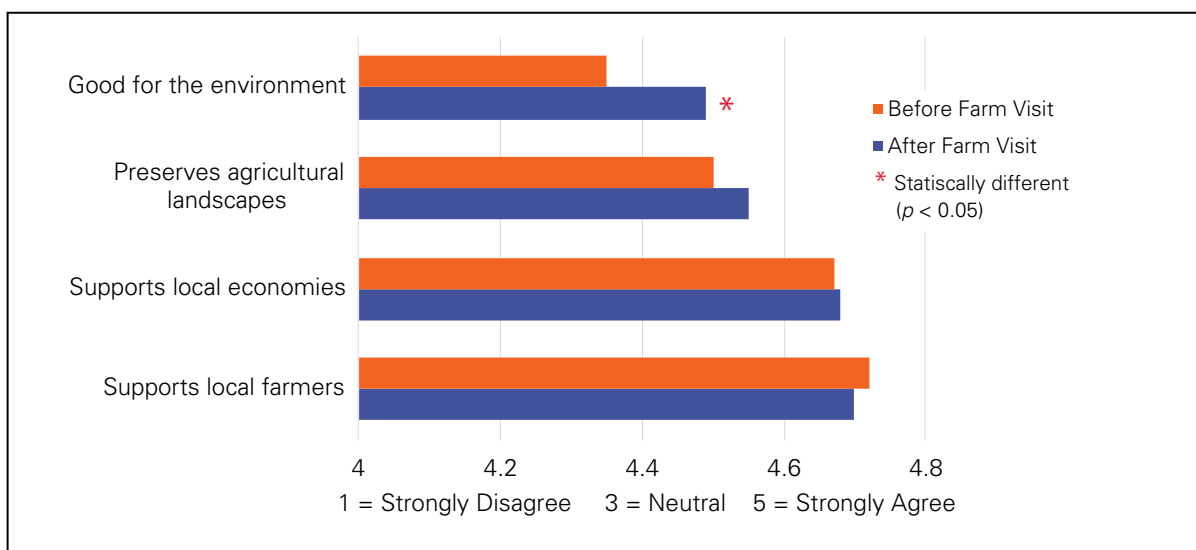


Figure 2. Change in respondents' perceptions of the broader effects of buying local foods.

Agritourism Experiences Boosted Intentions to Buy Local Foods

Farm visitors' intentions to purchase local foods increased after participating in agritourism (Figure 3). We observed a significant increase in intentions to "buy food with the GotTo Be NC label," which suggests the efficacy of this label to build awareness of producers and suppliers of local food. Intentions to "look at food labels to see where food comes from" also increased significantly, further highlighting the potential role of agritourism to promote local foods consumption and, by extension, benefit local economies.



Figure 3. Change in respondents' intentions to buy local foods.

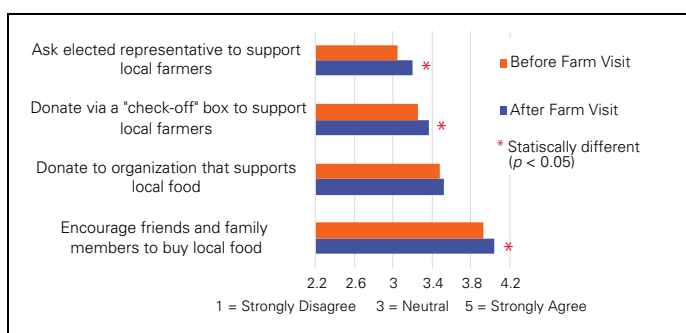


Figure 4. Change in visitors' intentions to advocate for local foods.

Participating in agritourism also increased visitors' intentions to advocate for local foods (Figure 4). Specifically, participants' intentions to ask an elected representative to support local foods, donate to support local farmers, and encourage family members and friends to buy local foods all increased after their farm visit. The "ripple effect" of influence (visitors sharing their experiences with friends and family members) demonstrates the potential of agritourism to bolster local farms visitation and sales.

Agritourism Improved Willingness to Increase Budget to Buy Local Foods

In our study, visitors indicated a willingness to increase their monthly food budget by up to 20% to buy more local foods (Figure 5). Visitors' intentions to increase their budget by five and ten percent were statistically significant after their visit. These results suggest that agritourism has the potential to reduce the perceived economic barrier (price) to purchasing local foods on a regular basis. From this, we would recommend that producers provide information related to the origin of the product (e.g., grown in NC) when selling in off-farm outlets to entice customers whose awareness of local foods may have increased after engaging in agritourism.

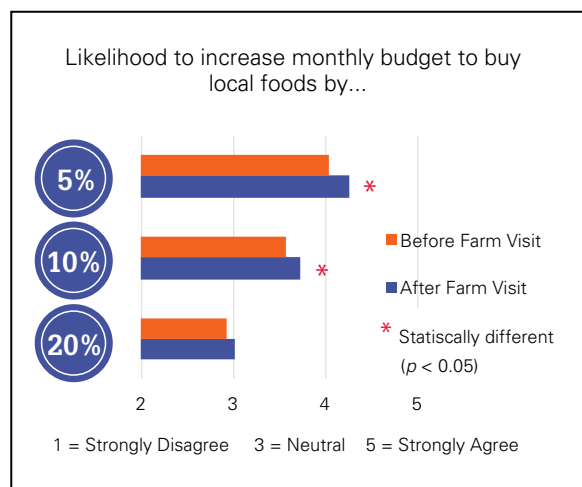


Figure 5. Change in visitors' likelihood to increase monthly budget to buy local foods after farm visit.

Concluding Remarks and Implications

The positive impact of agritourism experiences on visitors' perceptions of local foods and their intentions and willingness to advocate for and purchase local foods found in this study amplifies the already known economic (e.g., increase of profits), environmental (e.g., wildlife conservation), and socio-cultural (e.g., heritage preservation) benefits of agritourism. These marketing benefits position agritourism as an effective way to reconnect agricultural producers with consumers and strengthen local food systems, which combined can contribute to local economies and promote sustainability over the long term. Thus, as family farms seek to remain competitive in changing agricultural markets, they may want to consider agritourism as a means to effectively promote local foods, which ultimately can increase their sales.

We suggest that farmers welcoming visitors on their farms undertake three main managerial actions to magnify the marketing role of agritourism: improve on-site educational signage, expand visitors' opportunities to purchase locally grown/produced products, and facilitate visitors' recommendation of agritourism and local foods to family and friends (Figure 6).

Policymakers seeking to promote local foods and local foods systems can refer to our study results to support family farms offering or seeking to offer agritourism. However, it is important to keep in mind that other obstacles to local foods consumption, such as availability at stores, may persist as substantial barriers. Thus, concerted efforts should seek to reduce physical (e.g., access) and personal (e.g., perceptions) barriers affecting local foods producers, agritourism farms, and the consumption of local foods.



Figure 6. Suggestions to magnify the marketing role of agritourism.

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