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Building an International Support System: The Case of the Global Agritourism Network

The Global Agritourism Network (GAN) was launched in 2023 and has become an important force for inspiring collaboration in the emerging agritourism sector. The formation of GAN serves as a case study about the development of an international network with relevance for other emerging tourism sectors.

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Table of Contents

Summary	2
Learning Outcomes.....	2
The Value and Interest of the Case Study.....	3
Background.....	3
Global Collaboration as a Strategy to Address Challenges	4
The Global Agritourism Network (GAN) Approach	5
Global Definition and Core Values of Agritourism	5
Conclusions	7
Exercises/Group Discussion Questions	7
Further Reading and Resources	7
References	8

Summary

With roots in ancient agricultural traditions that celebrated planting, harvesting, and communal foodways, what has become known as agritourism has long been a vital link connecting us to food and place. The modern-day version of agritourism merges two of the largest industries – agriculture and tourism – by creating experiences for visitors on working farms. Historically, the practice of gathering on farms was built into cultural traditions and not given a specific name. Over time, agritourism formalized, starting with Italy's legislation on *agriturismo* in the 1980s that emphasized its potential to diversify farm incomes and preserve cultural heritage. This recognition sparked global interest as consumers and small-scale producers sought new ways to engage with the food experience economy. The growth of agritourism has highlighted challenges that stem primarily from the variability of practices and agricultural traditions and the lack of consistent support for its development. The Global Agritourism Network (GAN) emerged as a solution to these challenges. Formed in 2023 through international collaboration, GAN brings together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders from over 100 countries. Its mission is to strengthen agritourism by fostering knowledge-sharing, building capacity, and addressing the sector's diverse needs. GAN's initiatives include organizing in-person and hybrid conferences, hosting virtual webinars, and supporting the development of research and resources that empower agritourism stakeholders to navigate the sector's complexities.

Learning Outcomes

Foundation level

1. Define agritourism and give examples.
2. Analyze similarities and differences in agritourism across regions of the world.

3. Explain the role of the Global Agritourism Network in supporting farmers, tourism practitioners, researchers, and others working in agritourism.
4. Describe how the Global Agritourism Network can serve as a model for fostering international collaboration in other tourism sectors.

Advanced level

1. Analyse the history and roots of agritourism and trace the evolution of this emerging sector.
2. Evaluate the challenges and opportunities of agritourism for farmers and others working in agritourism.
3. Propose strategies to improve the effectiveness and success of agritourism in different parts of the world.
4. Develop an action plan for the Global Agritourism Network to increase its effectiveness in supporting agritourism globally and consider how this plan could be adapted to other sectors.

The Value and Interest of the Case Study

GAN's impact has been transformative thus far. By creating a global platform for connection and innovation, GAN has worked to amplify the voices of agritourism practitioners, promote sustainable tourism practices, and support agricultural communities. Its work exemplifies how collaborative networks can bridge gaps and drive growth in niche tourism sectors (Chiodo *et al.*, 2019; Bertella and Rinaldi, 2020), especially in the context of agritourism (Li and Barbieri, 2020). This case study of GAN demonstrates the power of global networks to address the challenges of agritourism development. Its collaborative and horizontal approach, which ensures leadership and input are evenly distributed among diverse stakeholders worldwide, provides a framework for building and scaling international networks that cultivate vibrant communities of practice.

Background

Agritourism, a term that combines agriculture and tourism, represents a convergence of two enduring aspects of human civilization: food production and cultural exchange. While the term itself is relatively new, agritourism has roots that stretch back millennia (Chase *et al.*, 2025). It evolved organically from agricultural traditions and celebrations, where communities gathered at agricultural sites to honor the link between food and community. For example, agricultural festivals in ancient Mesopotamia to celebrate cycles of planting and harvesting bridged the cultural and economic gap between urban elites and rural farmers (Van de Mieroop, 1999). Similarly, Indigenous communities around the world, such as the Iroquois in North America, have historically celebrated agricultural milestones with ceremonies that honored the land and its produce (Oneida Cultural Heritage Department, 2017).

The historic gatherings embedding agriculture into the heart of society reflect humanity's enduring connection to the land and the continued adaptation of rural economies to meet market needs. They also show agritourism's role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering communal bonding. These early practices resonate through today's agritourism experiences, which often emphasize local traditions and seasonal cycles to reconnect visitors with the origins of their food and culture.

Modern agritourism: Origins and evolution

The formalization of agritourism began in the post-World War II era, a period marked by rapid urbanization and agricultural decline. By the mid-20th century, rural Europe faced serious socioeconomic challenges, which sparked initiatives to revitalize rural areas. For example, in the 1950's, France introduced government support to repurpose underutilized infrastructure into hospitality services, known as *gîtes ruraux* (Sharpley and Vass, 2006). Shortly after, in 1985, the Italian government introduced legislation that provided tax incentives for farmers to restore rural properties and diversify their incomes by offering hospitality services (Sonnino, 2004). These policies catalyzed a resurgence of positive rural identities, preserving architectural heritage, and fostering sustainable economic development.

Overtime, agritourism has evolved to reflect the diverse cultural, agricultural, geopolitical, and economic contexts of different regions (Barbieri & Streifeneder, 2019; Chase and Grubinger, 2014). Agritourism can foster a deeper

appreciation for agriculture as a cornerstone of cultural identity, as seen in the designation of many origin products. For example, Parmigiano-Reggiano in Italy attracts visitors to taste this cheese, which was developed *in situ* for long preservation in the Middle Ages. Rooibos in South Africa entices visitors to travel to find a plant native to a specific mountain biome that has been domesticated into a tea herb. The uniqueness of these products stems from their specific agroecological conditions and native modes of production, which creates a distinction with the capacity to attract visitors.

Despite their uniqueness and distinctiveness, these agricultural products and their associated practices share common effects. By inviting visitors to experience agricultural experiences, agritourism sustains agricultural livelihoods and their associated values (e.g., farmscapes, heritage) while generating additional revenue streams for small-scale farmers (Busby and Rendle, 2000; Tew and Barbieri, 2012). At the same time, while the uniqueness and distinctiveness are the *raison d'être* of regional agritourism, they are also the source of challenges for development and promotion.

Global Collaboration as a Strategy to Address Challenges

While regional variations enrich the agritourism sector, especially to broaden the breadth of offerings and to foster uniqueness, they also complicate efforts to share knowledge, build capacity, and establish the best practices. Without structured networks to bridge these gaps, stakeholders, including farmers, tourism operators, policymakers, and scholars, often operate in isolation, limiting their ability or duplicating efforts to address shared challenges. Establishing platforms to facilitate global collaboration provides a framework to connect regional successes and foster innovation on a larger scale (O'Neill and Whatmore, 2000; Roman *et al.*, 2020).

From local partnerships to global collaboration

Collaboration at the local level has consistently demonstrated its capacity to drive positive outcomes for agritourism. Community-based efforts exemplify how local partnerships can create sustainable models that balance economic growth with cultural preservation. When farmers, NGOs, and government agencies come together, they can address pressing issues such as resource limitations, skill-building, and market access. Local collaboration has been shown to preserve cultural heritage while delivering long-term economic benefits, ensuring that tourism initiatives are both respectful of local traditions and economically viable (Manaf *et al.*, 2018; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, partnerships between stakeholders in rural areas foster a shared sense of purpose and align efforts toward common goals. When scholars, researchers, extension personnel, farmers, and policymakers collaborate, as seen in certain rural tourism initiatives, they enhance economic resilience while promoting cultural heritage to a wider audience (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2010). At the community level, these collaborative efforts not only strengthen individual stakeholders but also build the trust and organizational capacity needed to scale these initiatives to regional and global levels.

While local collaboration provides a strong foundation, regional and global collaboration are essential to address broader, systemic challenges that cannot be resolved by isolated efforts. Agritourism stakeholders often face barriers such as fragmented markets, inconsistent policy frameworks, and uneven access to resources (Hollas *et al.*, 2022). These challenges, which are shared across the globe, necessitate broader networks that connect practitioners and allow them to exchange and co-develop knowledge and establish shared strategies (Clarke, 1999).

Regional efforts highlight how collaboration can expand the capabilities of stakeholders. Tourism organizations have shown the value of “coopetition,” cooperation across competitors, during events by working together to share resources and achieve mutual benefits. Such coopetition has allowed stakeholders to pool their expertise and achieve outcomes that exceeded the capacity of individual organizations (Werner *et al.*, 2015). Expanding this principle globally is essential to overcoming the challenges that transcend regional boundaries and require collective action.

Global collaboration also helps to address the inefficiencies of fragmented systems of support. A multilayer network approach, as Cehan *et al.* (2021) proposed, integrates local, regional, and global perspectives to create solutions that are both scalable and contextually relevant. By bridging the gap between local and global stakeholders, such networks facilitate the flow of resources so that agritourism initiatives can respond effectively to global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and cultural homogenization.

The Global Agritourism Network (GAN) Approach

Despite the successes of local and regional efforts, the agritourism sector lacks a unified global framework to address its shared complexities. The diversity of agritourism practices, while valuable, requires a coordinated approach to ensure that knowledge-sharing and capacity-building are not confined to isolated pockets of success. Global networks can enable practitioners to learn from each other's experiences, adapt successful models to their own contexts, and collectively advocate for policies that support the sector's growth.

GAN illustrates the potential of global collaboration to bridge these gaps. By uniting stakeholders from over 100 countries, it provides a platform for addressing common needs. Through networking opportunities and task-oriented committees, GAN fosters connections that amplify the impact of more localized efforts and offers a path toward addressing shared challenges with agritourism development. By operationalizing ideas for collaborative work (e.g., establishing a global definition), GAN demonstrates how collective action can create a unified voice for agritourism, at the global level.

Because modern challenges are shared across borders, global cooperation is no longer optional but essential. The challenges of agritourism's variability and the pressures of a rapidly changing global environment – be it through climate change, shifting consumer preferences, or economic instability – demand coordinated efforts. By investing in global collaboration, stakeholders can ensure that agritourism continues to thrive as a dynamic and sustainable sector that supports agricultural communities worldwide.

Formation of GAN

GAN was officially launched in 2023, but its seeds were planted in 2018 in Bolzano, Italy, at the First World Congress on Agritourism. This event resulted in profound impacts, including several partnerships across countries, a series of webinars through the COVID-19 pandemic, and the International Workshop on Agritourism held in Burlington, Vermont, USA, in 2022. During this second gathering, the call for action to develop a stronger connection and structure around agritourism collaboration at a global level was clearer, louder, and more passionate. The founding of GAN was a direct result of that call for action.

Soon after the conference in Vermont, agritourism leaders from around the globe came together to discuss the need for international collaboration to support agritourism. After six months of discussion and planning, GAN was officially launched on April 11, 2023, at an online meeting with 271 participants from 55 countries. Since then, GAN has grown rapidly, reaching over 1000 participants from 118 countries by the start of 2026.

GAN seeks to build capacity for farmers and agritourism stakeholders worldwide and promote practices that sustain the natural environment, local cultures, and social and economic well-being of rural communities. Key goals for the coming years include hosting regional and international webinars and conferences, engaging with global organizations such as UN Tourism and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to raise the profile of agritourism, and strengthening agritourism through research and data-sharing.

GAN was built on a model of distributed leadership, meaning that all members share collective responsibility and are invested in its success. Active members recognize there is no end to what GAN can accomplish by collaborating globally while rooted in local farms and communities. While delivering many benefits and satisfaction, getting involved in a global network, regardless of holding a leadership role, requires a commitment to engage in its activities and contribute to its endeavors to achieve success.

Specific challenges that GAN is addressing include linguistic, cultural, and policy differences across countries. Even finding an online meeting time for everyone is simply not possible – it's always midnight somewhere. Funding is often an issue for nascent organizations, and GAN is no exception, as it works to build a model that is financially viable for the long term and that promotes continuity and inclusivity.

A major challenge that GAN persistently worked on during its first two years of inception was to reconcile different perspectives to identify a universal definition of agritourism that could reflect core values shared across the globe. The commitment to developing such a definition of agritourism exemplifies how GAN has built upon its membership's accumulated knowledge and expertise across a diversity of professional and cultural backgrounds to overcome a major challenge to move forward the agritourism industry (Quendler *et al.*, 2026).

Global Definition and Core Values of Agritourism

The variations of agritourism offerings resulting from regional cultural, agricultural, geopolitical, and economic variations have evolved along a diversity of definitions to depict them. Such a definitional mosaic goes in tandem with

the economic and political justification behind its development. Regions that promote agritourism to support small-scale agricultural production often define it as a farm-based enterprise whose offerings (e.g., events, activities) must take place within functional working agricultural settings (Chase *et al.*, 2018). They can even impose strict limitations, such as setting a maximum proportion of labor that can be allocated to visitor services compared to agricultural tasks, to reduce the risk of tourism overshadowing agricultural production. Regions seeking to revitalize rural areas often prioritize (re)establishing direct connections between local food producers and consumers. Thus, they may classify off-site community events (e.g., festivals) and outlets (e.g., farmers markets) as forms of agritourism.

While the definitional diversity of agritourism is valuable for capturing contextual variations, it also presents a set of challenges, particularly when attempting to scale up agritourism to national or global levels (Hollas *et al.*, 2024). Inconsistent definitions can evoke different feelings (leading to rejection) among different stakeholders, potentially reducing marketing effectiveness when their perceptions are not aligned (Veeck *et al.*, 2006). Expanding the geographic reach of agritourism requires orchestrated efforts, notably policy and advocacy-related, to promote the development or strengthening of agritourism (Colton and Bissix, 2005). Yet chances of these collaborative efforts succeeding are slim when partners have differing understandings of agritourism. Lastly, different definitions slow the scholarly advancement of agritourism, hindering outreach efforts and progress in the field (Barbieri, 2020).

GAN's definition & standards committee: Scope and procedures

Considering agritourism's potential to enhance the livelihoods of small-scale agricultural producers, conserve their associated resources, and support surrounding communities, while acknowledging the need to find a common definitional framework to advance the practice and scholarship of agritourism globally, GAN formed an *Ad-hoc* committee to lay the groundwork for a unified agritourism definition. The "Definition and Standards" committee was charged with developing a high-order definition that could serve as a global framework encompassing shared elements that could be adapted to different regional contexts. To accomplish such a task, The committee was composed of about 30 farmers, scholars, and other professionals from private, public, and non-profit agencies representing Africa (1 country), the Americas (3 countries), Asia (4 countries), Europe (5 countries), and Oceania (1 country).

At the first meeting, the committee agreed to collect available information on the existing definitions across the globe. As the committee began discussing the 14-page compilation of existing definitions – characterized by highly divergent core attributes and minimal commonalities, members quickly realized that achieving consensus would not be straightforward. Thus, they redirected their efforts to identify shared values of agritourism that could guide future discussions. They also agreed on the need to develop a statement delimiting the variability of the practice of agritourism. A small 7-member working group summarized the information, identifying a few values with high levels of agreement and many values with considerable variations. The committee progressively discussed these values, requiring one or two sessions for each value, until reaching a consensus on their global applicability and ensuring a clear narrative. Polls were used to refocus the discussion when opinions diverged or consensus was unclear, followed by a formal vote for the final adoption of values.

GAN's high-level definition of agritourism

The first discussion step (May 2023–February 2024) resulted in the identification of five values that should drive agritourism development worldwide: (1) agritourism results from the synergistic intersection of agriculture and tourism; (2) agritourism is an agricultural diversification activity; (3) agricultural production (e.g., crops, trees, livestock, fish) is the basic function of the agritourism setting. Direct derivatives (e.g., products, services) are supporting functions of agritourism; (4) agritourism showcases the agricultural, natural, social, and cultural resources of the region or locality, both tangible and intangible; and (5) agritourism provides authentic experiences by reflecting local/regional culture, traditions, innovations, and ways of life, delivering meaningful activities, products, and services, and sharing unique stories and practices.

The second discussion step (March–April 2024) resulted in acknowledging that the values, definitions, and activities related to agritourism may vary across the world, given geographic, sociocultural, and policy contexts. More specifically, these variations captured contextual factors concerning: (1) legal or customary boundaries related to the land, the operator, or agritourism activities; (2) land tenure status, such as rented, owned, community-managed; (3) agricultural operation size, type, and location; (4) frequency of offerings, whether seasonal or year-round; and (5) agritourism-related standards. The set of variable factors organically emerged from divergent understandings of agritourism among members. The final adopted values and variability statement were presented at the Second World Agritourism Conference in Bolzano, Italy, on May 17, 2024, where signatures were collected to establish social legitimacy.

Building upon the adopted values and variability statement, the members adopted the following definition on November 14, 2024:

"Agritourism is an agricultural diversification activity that results from the synergistic intersection of agriculture and tourism. Agritourism offers authentic experiences related to agricultural production that showcase the tangible and intangible resources of the region or locality."

The committee sought broader cultural legitimacy through a poll across the entire GAN membership from March to May 2025. Results from 259 participants from over 50 countries indicate a strong social legitimization, with 84% indicating that the definition depicts well (43%) or very well (41%) agritourism in their country, given even higher legitimization (90%) to the variability statement (Quendler *et al.*, 2026).

Conclusions

As agritourism grows around the globe, it presents great opportunities for farmers and their communities to diversify income streams and share their agricultural heritage with visitors ranging from nearby neighbors and local schoolchildren to international travelers seeking to learn about agriculture in different parts of the world. However, welcoming visitors on farms can lead to a range of risks, liabilities, and complications for farmers and their families, employees, land, and livestock. Policymakers have addressed these concerns from a variety of perspectives, at times supporting agritourism and other times enacting legislation that makes it difficult for farmers to diversify and maintain viable agricultural operations.

The Global Agritourism Network was formed in 2023 to foster sustainable agritourism practices that benefit farmers, local communities, and visitors. By sharing resources, knowledge, and experiences, GAN members strive to enhance the global agritourism landscape, creating meaningful travel experiences rooted in local culture, agriculture, and heritage. GAN's mission is to connect and support agritourism practitioners, researchers, and enthusiasts across the globe that benefits local agricultural producers, communities, and visitors. Everyone working with agritourism is welcome to join GAN, as the network seeks to strengthen agritourism locally, regionally, and internationally.

Exercises/Group Discussion Questions

1. Reflecting on the case study, identify the key stakeholders involved in agritourism. Describe their relationships and illustrate how they may have competing and/or complementary interests. How can the Global Agritourism Network provide support that expands opportunities for collaboration across stakeholders?
2. Imagine that you are a consultant hired to write a mission statement and strategic plan for the Global Agritourism Network. What are the top priorities for the next 5 years? What actions would you devise to overcome current challenges?
3. What lessons from this case study can be applied to other emerging tourism sectors similar to agritourism (e.g., craft-beer tourism)? How might those lessons vary across different parts of the world?

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Further Reading and Resources

- To learn more about the Global Agritourism Network, visit <https://globalagritourismnetwork.org/> (accessed 2 June 2026).
- Agritourism resources for farmers, tourism professionals, and service providers are online at <https://www.agmrc.org/foodsystems/agritourism> (accessed 2 June 2026).
- A recently published book about agritourism is: Barbieri, C. (2026) *Rethinking Agritourism*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/usd/rethinking-agritourism-9781035317516.html> (accessed 2 June 2026).

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