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RESEARCH LETTER



# Broadening the utilitarian epistemology of agritourism research through children and families

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## ABSTRACT

The genesis of agritourism is rooted in diversifying income for farmers, and accordingly, epistemological framing of agritourism research has focused on understanding the direct economic value of farm visits. The literature has identified multiple measures of tourism values and we propose that a similar broad epistemological perspective is needed to expand the analysis of the full spectrum of benefits that agritourism can provide to farmers and food systems. We describe the potential, yet unmeasured, benefits of agritourism and propose to empirically examine the educational and marketing potential of agritourism through building agricultural literacy among young visitors and encouraging family-level support of local food systems. We offer this as one example of how to expand of the epistemological approach to agritourism research, which will allow for a more holistic account of its benefits.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Agritourism; utilitarian epistemology; agriculture literacy

## Introduction

Agritourism, the fusion of the agriculture and tourism industries, integrates a variety of consumptive (e.g. u-pick) and non-consumptive (e.g. orchard tours) recreational and educational activities in working agricultural settings (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rozier Rich, 2013). Defined from its inception as a type of agricultural enterprise, the study of agritourism is typically framed within the utilitarian epistemology, mainly as a diversification strategy to increase the economic value of the farm business (Barbieri, Mahoney, & Butler, 2008). In that regard, visitors directly enhance agricultural revenues and profits (e.g. ticket sales), which is critical for small and medium-size farmers to keep their land and pass it to the next generation (Schilling, Attavanich, & Jin, 2014).

The literature also posits that agritourism has the capacity to benefit society in much broader ways (Barbieri, 2013). Yet, many of these benefits, notably educational gains and cross-marketing, largely remain unmeasured (McGehee, 2007; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). This note highlights both understudied but often-speculated benefits of agritourism by offering methodological insights to empirically assess the actual degree to which agritourism enhances the agricultural literacy of children and stimulates the purchase of local foods among families. We propose this example as a step toward broadening the epistemological and methodological approaches of agritourism research to move beyond surface descriptions of economic utility and offer ways to account for the full value of agritourism.

## The educational utility of agritourism

Farmers' motivations to develop agritourism reflect a desire to build agricultural literacy among visitors (Tew & Barbieri, 2012), thus call for examining agritourism beyond its pure direct economic value.

Agritourism activities (e.g. u-pick, animal displays) are often marketed to both children (e.g. field trips) and families, yearning to build agricultural literacy in current and future generations. An agriculturally literate consumer has knowledge of food systems, comprehends the connections between their decisions and the broader agroecological system, and can make informed decisions to support sustainable agriculture through individual (e.g. purchasing behaviours) and collective (e.g. policy support) action (Powell, Agnew, & Trexler, 2008). Although the ultimate aim of producers' efforts to build agricultural literacy may be economic (e.g. increase sales), the proximate goals of building knowledge and connecting with consumers are more holistic.

Agritourism activities may be conducive to building visitors' agricultural literacy because they incorporate principles of experiential and place-based education, which improve knowledge gain, stimulate learning interest and motivation, and foster higher-order thinking skills (Ives & Obenchain, 2006). For example, hands-on agricultural activities (e.g. u-pick, petting animals) provide visitors with opportunities for exploration and learning through direct contact in place-based contexts (i.e. real working farms), key attributes of experiential learning. Combined, experiential and place-based education have been linked to pro-environmental and civically engaged behaviours among young learners and adults (Jacobson, McDuff, & Monroe, 2015), suggesting that agritourism may stimulate visitors' support for local food systems. While previous work has examined how place-based agritourism education experiences foster visitors' bonds with agricultural systems (Kline, Barbieri, & LaPan, 2016), research measuring the actual educational impacts of agritourism experiences on children or adults is scant.

### **The cross-marketing utility of agritourism**

Farmers perceive that a major value of agritourism is the cross-marketing (e.g. branding, promotion, sales) of farm products reflected post-visit (Tew & Barbieri, 2012), which represents an additional form of economic utility beyond on-farm direct revenues (e.g. ticket sales). This potential benefit is synergistic with educational benefits, as children and adults who visit farms may become more agriculturally literate and subsequently more supportive of local food systems through purchasing behaviours. Research from diverse contexts, such as energy conservation (Boudet et al., 2016), technology use (Hampshire, 2000), and purchasing household commodities (Flurry & Burns, 2005), indicates that communication and education aimed at children can influence parents' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that children visiting farms on school fieldtrips may influence their parents' willingness to purchase local foods.

Education-based agritourism activities, such as school field trips and hands-on experiences, align with best practices for encouraging intergenerational transfer of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours between children and parents. These include programmes that are action-oriented, feature community-based local contexts, and involve parents in a meaningful way (Duvall & Zint, 2007). Thus, it is logical to hypothesize that agritourism activities programmed for children may have the potential to simultaneously build agricultural literacy and amplify farmers' cross-marketing benefits. However, no studies to our knowledge have examined these potentially synergistic benefits.

### **Broadening agritourism epistemology through methodological innovation**

Accounting for the full value of agritourism requires an epistemological change to increase disciplinary linkages (e.g. education, economics) and broaden myopic approaches focusing on farmers and visitors' perceptions that inhibit empirical measurement of actual benefits (Barbieri, 2013). Such change calls for methodologies that are rarely applied to agritourism research. We suggest answering Dolnicar and Ring's (2014) call for greater application of experimental research designs in tourism research by utilizing such methods to measure agritourism values. As one example, we illustrate how a combined interdisciplinary epistemology and experimental methodology might be applied

to investigate agritourism's role in increasing agricultural literacy in late childhood and encouraging parents' purchasing of local foods.

Children between nine and 12 years old possess the cognitive abilities to understand complex topics, such as agricultural systems, and the affective enthusiasm to maximize informal learning, such as in agritourism (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). They also tend to visit farms through schools fieldtrips and influence family purchasing (Duvall & Zint, 2007). A quasi-experimental study, conducting pre- and post-intercept surveys of families visiting agritourism operations, may facilitate assessing children's learning and parents' local food purchasing intentions. Alternatively, an experimental design might include randomly assigning teachers (and by association, students and parents) to treatment and control groups. Treatment teachers could programme agritourism field trips with classes and/or associated lesson plans to support learning through the experience. Researchers would conduct pre- and post-surveys of students and parents to assess gains in agricultural literacy (children) and intent to purchase local foods (parents). We suggest that these types of methodologies are necessary to build a more holistic understanding of agritourism's benefits.

### **Research for a holistic understanding of agritourism**

Agritourism has the potential to strengthen local food systems, and subsequently enhance the economic, environmental, and social health of a given place (Feenstra, 2002). However, to make this contribution, the utilitarian epistemology and methodology of agritourism research must expand. In this paper, we offer one example of how researchers might address this need; but certainly, there are many others. Future agritourism research could extend their utilitarian epistemology to other values found in the rural tourism literature including the contribution of women to rural economies (Shortall, 2008), renovation and preservation of heritage (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006), reduced unemployment in rural areas (Deller, 2010), and mitigation of rural-urban migration (Anderson, 2015). In each of these cases, it is urgent that methodologies expand beyond assessing actors' perceptions to measuring actual benefits across different disciplines and sectors.

Beyond advancing agritourism scholarship, our proposed epistemological and methodological sophistication can help tourism destination managers, policymakers, and other key stakeholders craft strategies to amplify the values of agritourism and benefit all local food system actors. For example, identifying activities yielding greater agricultural literacy among children can guide educational policy to allocate funds supporting school visits to farms. Measuring the extent to which children's agricultural literacy 'trickles-up' to influence parents' behaviours can help the agriculture and tourism sectors orchestrate efforts to enhance the offer and reach of agritourism activities. Measuring actual values of agritourism (e.g. cultural preservation and re-creation, conservation of natural resources) will create a more holistic understanding of the utility of agritourism and give farmers, policymakers, and visitors the tools they need to account for and communicate the full value of agritourism.

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