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Leisure Farming In Taiwan: The Evolution of a Subset of Rural Tourism Set Apart From Traditional Agri-Tourism

The interface between traditional production-based farming and the public has become less distinct with the advent of rural tourism. Agri-tourism and leisure farming, which involves people as part of the process of farming rather than just in the products of farming (i.e., planting and harvesting crops vs. just buying produce at a farmer's market), is evidence of this newly emerging alternative use of agricultural lands. In Taiwan, there is a distinct and declarative difference between leisure farming and agri-tourism. Leisure farming in the Taiwanese context, in contrast to agri-tourism, is, in fact, a subset of rural tourism which operates on a spectrum ranging from the working farm to a full range of hospitality oriented services not tied or dependent upon agricultural production.

Keywords: leisure farming, agri-tourism, rural tourism, Taiwan

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Introduction

Agri-tourism, existing for more than 100 years (Glenn & Rounds, 1997; Busby & Rendle, 2000), and also known as agricultural tourism, farm tourism, or farm-based tourism, is an alternative use of farm or agricultural based property. It provides visitors with the opportunity to stay on the farm so that they can experience a variety of local agricultural or cultural related activities (Miller & Hsu, 2003; Hsu, 2005). Since farm tourism activities are highly correlated with agriculture, the term agri-tourism has gradually developed since the 1990s and has now evolved to become its own specific form of tourism. This particular tourism practice has become a growing component of the recreational industry. In Taiwan, the operation of agri-tourism could be traced back to the 1970s (Cheng, 2005) when pick-your-own produce activities were the prevalent form of agri-tourism in operation at that time. However, such operations were limited or constrained by seasonal conditions dictated by crop ripening and harvest times and as such gradually became less attractive to the public as the number of similar operations increased (Cheng, 2005).

In Taiwan, the practice of agri-tourism is noticeably and particularly referred to as leisure farming. The development of leisure farming was jointly initiated by the Council of Agriculture (COA) and the Department of Agricultural Extension of the National Taiwan University in 1989 (Jenq, 1998). This unique form of tourism in Taiwan has continued to develop ever since. The Council of Agriculture, the highest administrative authority in charge of making and enforcing agricultural policies in Taiwan, subsequently launched and implemented a series of plans and programs (e.g., the Leisure Farm Development and Management Program; Regulations for Counseling and Governance of Recreation Agriculture) for the purpose of promoting leisure farming and its related activities (i.e., overnight accommodations, bed and breakfasts, food services, etc.). It was expected that the

development of leisure farming could help diversify farm revenues, improve long-term operation viabilities, and boost local economies.

At the beginning stage of the development of leisure farming, the general idea and structural parameters of agri-tourism were used. Leisure farm operators partially converted their operations and practices into forms similar to that of a bed and breakfast pattern. These businesses had gradually become a unique sector of rural tourism due to their adherence to certain proven and successful marketing principles as well as the evolving relationship with what customers were desiring. This developing sector of blending both agriculture and tourism led to the need for better defining the connection between agri-tourism and leisure farming. Up to this point in time, the differences in agri-tourism and leisure farming have never been addressed in the literature. It would seem that the concepts of agri-tourism and leisure farming are identical to each other, and to some extent they both are similar. However, they are not synonymous. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to differentiate agri-tourism from leisure farming and to better define the position of leisure farming within the domain of rural tourism.

Examining the Definition of Agri-tourism

Many available definitions concerning agri-tourism are offered by numerous researchers (McGehee & Kim, 2004). Busby and Rendle (2000) document a chronology of 13 definitions associated with farm tourism/agri-tourism. Frater (1983) notes that farm tourism needs to be present on working farms and to be supplementary to a variety of existing farm activities. Evans and Ilbery (1985) state that agri-tourism is “a phenomenon of attracting people onto agricultural holdings” (p. 257). The other definition provided by Davies and Gilbert (1992) states that farm-based tourism is a form of rural tourism that enables visitors to experience agriculture-related activities on working farms. Leones, Dunn, Worden, and Call

(1994) define agri-tourism as “any agricultural activity that attracts people and encourages them to spend their leisure time and discretionary income on that activity” (p. 4). Glenn and Rounds (1997) regard agri-tourism as an economic activity between tourists and farm operators. Hsu (2005) notes that agri-tourism is an activity that engages tourist clientele to visit any agricultural operation for the purpose of experiencing leisure activities and educational opportunities. In summary, agri-tourism is considered as an interactive activity which involves agricultural producers, tourists, and the products and facilities of agriculturally-based operations. Mahoney (1987) and Knight (1999) specifically state that agri-tourism consists of a wide range of activities and operations with the principle effort based in the use of agricultural related facilities and activities to draw visitor attention and attempt to sell agricultural or farm related products to tourists.

Compared to the apparent prolific number of agri-tourism definitions, there is only one definition of leisure farming as provided by the Leisure Farm Guiding Regulations. Per the regulations, leisure farming is defined as an economic activity that, “utilizes the bucolic view, natural ecology, and environmental resources, and that combines agriculture, forestry, fishery and ranching production, agricultural activities, farmland culture, plus farmland lifestyle” (Chang, 2003, p. 21). The definition is inclusive to cover a broad range of possible settings for leisure farm practices. However, providing a variety of tourism-related services, activities, or accommodations and being located in the settings specified in the definition do not mean that the tourism which occurs is an actual agri-tourism operation. In fact, the leisure farming definition is broad enough to be considered as simply rural tourism rather than agri-tourism. As such, rural tourism is not a synonymous term with agri-tourism. It is generally agreed that agri-tourism is a subset of rural tourism (Clarke, 1996; Oppermann, 1996; Nilsson, 2002; Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010).

The Working Farm Argument

The word agri-tourism is a mixture of agriculture and tourism. The term is specific enough to pinpoint the essence and meaning of tourism, and yet an ambiguity about its scope and meaning still remain (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). The requirement that a farm engaged in agri-tourism must be a working farm is one starting point of the agri-tourism debate. Up to now, whether the agri-tourism services and activities offered should take place on any agricultural operation is the most frequently cited question concerning agri-tourism (Phillip et. al., 2010). Researchers have indicated that a variety of income-generating leisure services and activities need to be delivered in a place where agriculture is currently practiced and a number of existing definitions consider working farms, ranches or other agriculture-related settings as a prerequisite for offering leisure based activities (Frater, 1983; Evans & Ilbery, 1985; Davies & Gilbert, 1992; Oppermann, 1996; Lobo, 2003; Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). Ohe and Ciani (1998) specifically note that agri-tourism is a form of tourism activity “where only farming people can be involved” (p. 2). Additionally, many researchers refer to the agricultural practices which occur in agri-tourism as authentic or heritage forms of the agri-tourism industry (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013; Rickly-Boyd, 2012).

In Taiwan, a leisure farm is simply defined as a setting where leisure farming is practiced according to the Regulations for Agriculture Development. Although this definition is simple and understandable, the working farm requirement is still somewhat inconclusive. COA regulates that a leisure farm has to be located on agrarian land. As defined by Article 10 of the Regulations for Counseling and Governance of Recreation Agriculture (RCGRA), the area of agrarian land must cover at least 90% of that considered as the leisure farm and should be larger than 0.5 hectares (COA, 2013). The focus is primarily on the classification of agrarian land and its size. How a farm operates and what types of services and activities it provides are basically unaddressed.

In the broader context of the rural tourism debate, what constitutes a working farm is also an unresolved subject. Different categorizations have been proposed to address working farm definitions such as the proportion of agriculture to tourism income earned and the types of land dedicated to each use (Ilbery, 1991; Heimlich & Barnard, 1992). As Phillip et. al. (2010) revealed, “the definition of what constitutes a working farm itself has been largely ignored in the agri-tourism literature and in the majority of cases where a working farm is specified as a requirement of agritourism, no definition is given” (p. 754). In addition, from the perspective of visitors, a working farm may be perceived as having a limited tourism value. As Fleischer and Tchetchik (2005) pointed out:

The role of the farm and farmer is to supply the background that provides farm tourism with its unique feature...successful farm accommodations are located in an aesthetically pleasing, tranquil countryside environment: there is no reference to farm activities.

These observations lead to the conclusion that there is a range of links between agriculture and tourism and that these links are getting weaker, especially from the visitor’s point of view (p. 493).

Phillip et al. (2010) further indicate that agri-tourism can be performed in a non-farm setting. They specifically address it as non-working farm agri-tourism (NWF agri-tourism). Examples of NWF agri-tourism include rural accommodations using converted barns and/or farmhouses and activities that take place in agricultural heritage settings having more to do with local history than actual farm production. The focal point of these instances lies in the past and current connection to the agriculture lifestyle. This type of link may not be significant in the physical realm, but it does create an image of connecting agriculture, accommodations, hospitality, and rural scenery together. It is undecided if this variant of agri-tourism is considered as agri-tourism or perhaps rural tourism. In any case and up to this

point, it is generally agreed that agri-tourism has to occur on an agricultural operation. However, in the literature, what actually defines an agricultural operation is still subject to interpretation (Phillip et. al., 2010).

Source of Income

In the European Union (EU), under the Common Agricultural Policy, diversification means to encourage a voluntary decrease in agricultural production so as to minimize the phenomenon of food over-production (Nilsson, 2002). For many regions and countries, diversification refers to the valorisation of farm products, supporting local traditions and culture, and finding ways to increase farm revenues in order to keep businesses from being over-dependent on agricultural earnings (Panyik, Costa, & Ratz, 2011; Forbord, Schermer, & GrieBmair, 2012). Inviting tourists to stay on agriculture-related premises is considered one way to diversify the source of farm income. One of the primary reasons for promoting diversity in farming revenue streams is that the income of traditional commodity-based production family farms has increased little since the mid-1970s (Beus, 2008). Thus, incorporating tourism-based revenue diversification is regarded as an effective alternative for additional farm income generation opportunities as well as rural development (McGehee & Kim, 2004; Sharpley & Vass, 2006; Schilling, Attavanich, & Jin, 2014).

The question then turns into the proportion of income generated through agri-tourism business operations versus traditional commodity-based revenue. Is agricultural production still the primary source of income, or does the tourism sector become the principle livelihood provider? The former is a typical agri-tourism business which aims at generating additional income. The latter is more complicated. Is it possible for an agricultural operation to convert into a true tourism business no longer related to commodity-based agriculture (e.g., solely dependent on hospitality, accommodations, and the rural experience). If this is the case,

classifying this type of operation as a rural tourism business is relatively simple. The other possibility can be that a full-time tourism operation makes a connection with agriculture of some sort. In this case, such a business is likely to be a NWF agri-tourism practice. This type of tourism can be identified as “generic rural tourism” because it takes place at a non-farm setting while honouring the definition of the working farm (Phillip et. al., 2010, p. 756).

Conversely and as stated previously, the NWF tourism can also be considered as an agri-tourism form since its location and scenic attraction or background is somehow related to agriculture. That is, actual agricultural practices may not be required. In sum, as Phillip et. al. (2010) pointed out, whether the NWF tourism belongs to agri-tourism or rural tourism is subject to interpretation.

Based upon the previous discussion, the question of the appropriate nomenclature and classification for leisure farming in Taiwan can now be addressed. Due to the somewhat abstract definition, leisure farms simply need to be located on agrarian lands and meet the specified land area to be eligible for the development of their perspective tourism businesses. Therefore, practicing agriculture, in reality, may not be the major aim or activity for many leisure farm operations. The Taiwan Leisure Agriculture Association (2004) reveals that the earning generated from agricultural products for leisure farms in Taiwan is approximately 15% of their total income. Incomes from hospitality, accommodations, and other service-oriented activities might account for about 60% of leisure farm revenue.

The tourism sector has grown into an important livelihood strategy for leisure farms, whereas agriculture is more likely to serve a part-time role through the normal and common production goals of a farm. As such, routine agricultural production becomes a less significant factor for both income and farm activities. So, does a leisure farm, which earns around two-thirds of its income through tourism, be considered as an agri-tourism business or a rural tourism business? Research has shown that the conversion from agricultural

production to tourism can be an appropriate pathway for rural development (Schmitt, 2010).

The association of leisure farming and leisure farms in Taiwan seems to justify this proposition. However, the authenticity of agri-tourism also needs to be reconsidered.

Conclusion

Due, in large part, to the somewhat relaxed use of specific language and regulations which have put the concepts of agriculture, leisure, and tourism together, the misconception that agri-tourism and leisure farming are identical in Taiwan now exists. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to address the difference in agri-tourism and leisure farming in Taiwan. Through the comparison of definitions, agri-tourism, a subset of rural tourism, can be generally defined as an interactive activity that engages agricultural producers and their production facilities with tourists (Busby & Rendle, 2000; Hsu, 2005). With a unique name and definition, leisure farming is, in fact, more likely to be a form of rural tourism (Figure 1 & Figure 2).

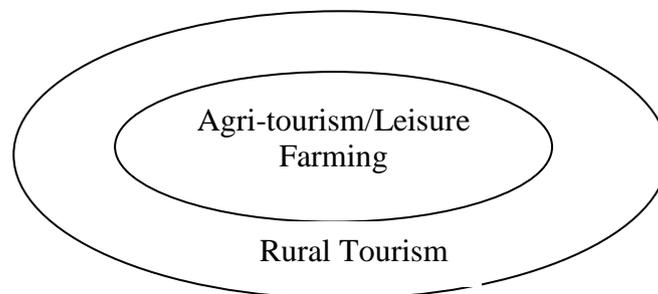


Figure 1: Original Ideology of Leisure Farming

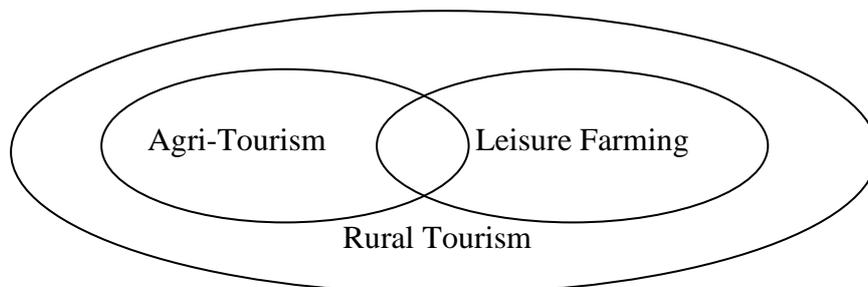


Figure 2: Differentiation between Leisure Farming and Agri-tourism

The use of the word “farming” within the nomenclature of "leisure farming" has actually created the confusion associated with agri-tourism and leisure farming. The definition which best describes leisure farming is simply too broad to be confined to that of only agri-tourism.

The debate around the working farm requirement and the sources of revenue are used to examine the differences between agri-tourism and leisure farming. A typical agri-tourism business should be a working farm which, based on available resources, provides different varieties of agriculture-related facilities and/or activities mixed with hospitality services. The income generated from the hospitality sector is supplementary in nature whereas commodity agriculture is the major source of revenue. Leisure farming is comprised of a number of leisure farm activities and is, in reality, a business with several revenue streams using the available resources to develop services and activities which attract tourists. Establishing the infrastructure and being more hospitality oriented are the characteristics of leisure farms in Taiwan. Revenues generated from the hospitality sector are the key to business sustainability. As such, the agricultural sector becomes less significant and, in many cases, these operations become a non-working farm agri-tourism business which should be categorized into the form of rural tourism.

The development of leisure farming in Taiwan does make it an exclusive system and practice. Not just the term or nomenclature of leisure farming being unique as referenced in the Taiwanese literature, but the developmental processes and operation strategies for leisure farming are distinctive as well. In this paper, we address that leisure farming stands alone from agri-tourism. Since the current literature shows that both agri-tourism and leisure farming are used interchangeably, the synonymous use may create a misconception and affect the interpretation of leisure farming in the context of the Taiwanese setting. In our view, the essence of agri-tourism, which specifically includes working farm operation and supplementary tourist-based income, should be the core of defining agri-tourism businesses.

If one of the definitions cannot be met, the subsequent form of tourism can be considered as rural tourism. In this case, leisure farming in the Taiwanese context is, in fact, a subset of rural tourism based on the knowledge that the tourism aspect operates on a spectrum ranging from the working farm to a full range of hospitality oriented services.

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