

The role of agritourism in heritage preservation

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Abstract:

This study examined the linkage between agritourism and heritage preservation by assessing the occurrence of and farmers' motivations for preserving tangible heritage in their farmlands. Results show that agritourism farmers are preserving tangible heritage in their farmlands, mainly driven by intrinsic motives. Farmland, farmer, and agritourism attributes are significantly associated with motivations driving heritage preservation. Study results suggest that although agritourism appears to be an adequate tool to preserve tangible heritage, farmers are missing the opportunity to economically gain from these resources, which may jeopardise the sustainability of their conservation efforts. This study not only advances the incipient understanding of the agritourism–heritage link, but identifies additional issues of this relationship that need to be investigated further.

Keywords: agritourism | farm tourism | heritage | motivations | preservation

Article:

Introduction and theoretical background

As farm revenues have declined over the past several decades, farmers have looked for alternative revenue streams to supplement income, oftentimes through agritourism. Although scholars and practitioners have defined agritourism in a number of ways (McGehee & Kim, 2004; Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010), a recent study reconciled differences and stated that agritourism entails any type of recreational or educational activity offered in any type of working agricultural setting, including farms (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rozier Rich, 2013). Agritourism produces a range of economic (e.g. increase of revenues and marketing opportunities) and non-economic (e.g. enhancement of the farmer's' quality of life) benefits to farmers and the farm household (McGehee & Kim, 2004; Schilling, Sullivan, & Komar, 2012; Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

Evidence of agritourism in the USA can be traced to the early 1900s when dude ranches offered visitors an authentic Western American lifestyle (Limerick, 2001). Despite such earlier occurrences, the popularity of agritourism expanded during the last 10 years due to the simultaneous growth of farms offering this form of recreation and visitors' desire to reconnect with rural lifestyles and their local farmers and communities (Carpio, Wohlgenant, & Boonsaeng, 2008; Cordell, 2008; USDA, 2007b). A variety of activities are typified as agritourism in the USA, including but not limited to the contemplation of farmscapes including their natural elements (e.g. on-farm bird watching, orchard tours), the participation in agricultural activities (e.g. recreational self-harvest), on-farm accommodation and food services, private and public events and festivals, and other types of on-farm outdoor recreation (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson, Black, & McCool 2001; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Although the types of agritourism activities vary due to farm resources and regional production prominence, evidence suggests that tours are the most common type of agritourism offer in the USA (Barbieri, 2013).

Several studies have examined motivations associated with agritourism development. These conclude that this form of on-farm enterprise is driven by a complex set of goals related to economic (e.g. increase revenues), market (e.g. better serving current clients), and individual/family (e.g. enjoying the rural lifestyle) aspirations (Barbieri, 2010; McGehee & Kim 2004; Nickerson et al., 2001; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007). Although historic preservation did not emerge in any of those agritourism-specific studies, natural and heritage preservation was found to be a strong driver among family-owned tourism operators in rural Australia (Carlsen, Getz, & Ali-Knight, 2001).

Tangible heritage, which includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artefacts, and other physical resources considered worthy of preservation for the future (UNESCO, 2013), are an important component of the rural landscape and the agritourism appeal. For example, the 2007 US Census of Agriculture showed that there are 664,264 historic barns across the country (USDA, 2007a). Although these barns represent local traditions and the evolution of farming practices and technology, they are vulnerable to economic and demographic shifts (Auer, 1989; NTHP, 2013). As a result, some efforts have been made to preserve rural tangible heritage and incorporate them into modern agricultural production (NTHP, 2013; The Economist, 2010).

Despite the growing body of agritourism research and the vulnerable standing of tangible heritage in rural areas, there is limited evidence in the literature about the linkage between agritourism and the preservation of tangible rural heritage (Fuentes, Gallego, Garcia, & Ayuga, 2010; Yang, 2012); such information is even more scarce pertaining to agritourism in the USA. From a marketing perspective, Burrows, Fennell, Redlin, and Verschoor (2007) suggested that agritourism operations in low-populated rural areas partner with local artists and cultural providers (e.g. galleries) to strengthen the tourism appeal of their town and entice urban visitors. In a study about sustainability indicators among US farms with a diversified economic portfolio, Barbieri (2013) found that agritourism farms do contribute significantly more to the preservation of heritage than other forms of farm entrepreneurial ventures. Such a study showed that agritourism farms preserved or restored cultural and historic resources twice as often than those who do not practice agritourism (Barbieri, 2013).

Although the extant literature has vaguely suggested tourism as a catalyst for rural heritage preservation, the linkage between agritourism and the preservation of tangible heritage has not been directly addressed yet. Accordingly, this research note intends to stimulate a deeper academic curiosity of this linkage by: (1) exploring the extent of tangible heritage preservation in agritourism farms; (2) assessing agritourism farmers' motivations for preserving tangible heritage; and (3) identifying factors associated with motivations for preserving heritage. A better understanding of the role of agritourism in rural heritage preservation in the USA is critical when taking into consideration the ongoing vulnerability of tangible heritage resources in rural areas, the economic struggles of small multi-generational farms, and the capacity of agritourism to produce additional farm income.

Methods

Data were collected through a survey administered to 592 farmers in Missouri during 2008 and 2009, using a combination of online and printed formats. The questionnaire queried about farmland, ownership, and farm economic characteristics, agritourism offerings and tangible heritage resources, and farmer socio-demographic profile (Appendix 1). The survey produced 243 valid responses (printed = 116; electronic = 107; 43.6% response rate); no significant differences were found between mail and online respondents. Given this research note focus, only the 164 responding farmers offering agritourism were included for analysis.

Descriptive statistics were used to: profile agritourism farmers, their farms, and their agritourism operation; explore the extent of tangible heritage preservation (objective 1); and examine motivations for heritage preservation (objective 2). Then, Cronbach's alphas were computed to test internal reliability of the intrinsic and utilitarian motivations for heritage preservation. Taking into account the non-normal distribution of the data, two-tailed Spearman's rho (ρ) correlations were used to examine relationships between socio-economic, farm, and agritourism attributes and motivations for preserving heritage (objective 3). Given the exploratory nature of this study as well as the small sample size, critical values at 10% were used ($p < .1$).

A dichotomous variable was used to assess the preservation of three types of tangible heritage: historic buildings, antique equipment, and other heritage. Five motivations for preserving heritage were tested; they were measured using five-point Likert scales (1 = not important; 5 = extremely important). Socio-economic variables correlated were farmers' age (seven categories ranging from 18 to 24 years old to at least 75 years old), household income (eight categories ranging from less than \$25,000 to \$200,000 or more), and off-farm employment measured as a percentage of total working time. Farm variables included total acreage (discrete variable), annual farm gross sales (eight categories ranging from less than \$1000 to \$1M or more), and proximity to a city of at least 50,000 people (six categories ranging from locations within a city populated with 50,000 to 60 miles or more). Agritourism indicators included the number of visitors received in 2008 (discrete variable), the number of years the farm had been receiving visitors (five categories ranging from less than 1 year to 10 years or more), and types of visitors (seven multiple choice categories; e.g. families with children 12 or younger, school groups).

Results

About one- fifth of the responding farmers were less than 45 years old (20.4%) or 65 years or older (19.9%). One- third (32.2%) of the farmers' annual household income was less than \$50,000, with 37.8% earning \$100,000 or more. These farmers dedicate most of their time to agricultural activities (58.9%), 18.5% to agritourism, and 19.2% to off-farm jobs. They represented operations of different sizes ($M=333.1$ acres); 28.3% reported less than \$10,000 annual gross sales, and 22.4% earned at least one quarter million dollars. Few farms (13.6%) were located within 10 miles of an urban cluster while most were located at least 30 miles away (67.3%).

Forty-one per cent (40.6%) have been receiving visitors for more than 10 years, while 19.6% had entered the agritourism sector within the past two years. On average, they received 7917 visitors annually, mostly composed of families with small children (74.1%), adult couples without children (72.2%), and seniors (73.5%); on average farms were catering to four ($M=4.1$) types of visitors. Respondents were offering a variety of agritourism activities, with the most common being educational (50.0%) and leisure (48.8%) tours, followed by recreational self-harvest (U-pick-up) activities (37.7%), and the observation/participation of agricultural practices (34.6%). Two- thirds were offering at least one type of hospitality service (64.6%), food services (e.g. tasting rooms, cookouts) and hosting services (e.g. weddings, corporate retreats) being the most common.

Over one-third (37.4%) of participating agritourism farms have preserved tangible heritage on their lands. Among those, the majority accommodate historic buildings, such as barns and mills (70.5%), or antique equipment, such as tractors or tools (54.1%); 18.0% maintained other types of heritage. Intrinsic motivations were the main driver for preserving heritage ($\alpha = 0.804$; $M = 4.3$), rendered by their desire to preserve American rural heritage ($M = 4.4$) or because they carry a personal or family meaning ($M = 4.3$; Table 1). Utilitarian reasons were less critical to preserve heritage ($\alpha = 0.797$; $M = 3.5$) but still important for repurposing, such as turning a barn into a gift shop ($M = 3.7$) or to increase the tourism appeal of the farm ($M = 3.6$). The generation of revenues did not appear to be important for preserving heritage among responding farmers ($M = 3.1$).

Table 1. Motivations behind tangible heritage preservation among agritourism farms.

| | Not important (%) | Somewhat important (%) | Neutral (%) | Important (%) | Very important (%) | Mean ^a | SD |
|--|-------------------|------------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Intrinsic Motivations^b | | | | | | 4.3 | |
| To preserve American rural heritage | 1.8 | 3.5 | 10.5 | 26.3 | 57.9 | 4.4 | 0.935 |
| Intrinsic value to me and my family | 0.0 | 6.9 | 13.8 | 25.9 | 53.4 | 4.3 | 0.947 |
| Utilitarian Motivations^c | | | | | | 3.5 | |
| To re-use it for other purposes | 9.3 | 7.4 | 25.9 | 16.7 | 40.7 | 3.7 | 1.323 |
| To increase farm tourism attractions | 10.4 | 17.2 | 13.8 | 22.4 | 36.2 | 3.6 | 1.403 |
| To increase farm revenues | 26.0 | 18.0 | 12.0 | 12.0 | 32.0 | 3.1 | 1.634 |

^a Measured using 5-point Likert scales anchoring in 1 (Not important) and 5 (Extremely important). ^b $n = 56$, $\alpha = 0.804$; ^c $n = 48$; $\alpha = 0.797$.

Farmers' off-farm employment, farm acreage, location, and number of visitors were associated with motivations to preserve tangible heritage (Table 2). The more time farmers spend on off-farm jobs, the less motivated they were in preserving tangible heritage to sustain rural American culture ($\rho = -.242$; $p = .075$), to increase their farm tourism appeal ($\rho = -.247$; $p = .068$), or to increase farm revenues ($\rho = -.257$; $p = .082$). Farm acreage was positively associated with sustaining American rural heritage ($\rho = .260$; $p = .053$) and negatively associated with preserving heritage for their adaptive re-use ($\rho = -.256$; $p = .067$). Also, the farther the farm was located from a city, the less the farmers preserved heritage to increase the tourism appeal of their farm ($\rho = -.243$; $p = .067$). The number of farm visitors was found to be positively associated with utilitarian reasons driving heritage preservation. The more visitors a farm receives, the more farmers preserve heritage for adaptive re-use ($\rho = .312$; $p = .024$), increasing the attraction appeal ($\rho = .286$; $p = .034$) or increasing revenues ($\rho = .301$; $p = .038$).

Table 2. Socio-economic, farm, and agritourism attributes associated with motivations behind heritage preservation.

| | Intrinsic motivations (ρ) | | Utilitarian motivations (ρ) | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | US heritage preservation | Family value | Adaptive re-use | Attraction appeal | Revenues increase |
| Farmers' socio-economic indicators | | | | | |
| Age | -.019 | -.077 | -.124 | .024 | -.116 |
| Household income | .000 | .147 | .006 | -.101 | -.241 |
| Off-farm employment | -.242* | -.154 | -.168 | -.247* | -.257* |
| Farm characteristics | | | | | |
| Total acreage | .260* | .218 | -.256* | -.099 | -.068 |
| Gross sales | .047 | .130 | -.032 | -.021 | .075 |
| Distance from city | .058 | .052 | -.155 | -.243* | -.185 |
| Agritourism attributes | | | | | |
| How long receiving visitors | .004 | .003 | -.098 | .012 | -.034 |
| Number of visitors (2008) | .038 | .041 | .312** | .286** | .301** |
| Types of visitors | -.134 | -.092 | .001 | .149 | .101 |

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$.

Discussion of results

Agritourism farms are preserving tangible heritage – mostly historic buildings and antique equipment – which is critical given the vulnerable situation of the rural American legacy. Other types of tangible heritage (e.g. Indian ceramics) are also being preserved, although to a lesser extent. Results suggest that American heritage is deep-rooted among agritourism farmers for cultural and personal meanings, rather than for their utilitarian value. Although farmers recognise the marketing role of heritage in product development (i.e. enhance the farm's tourism appeal), they are not valuating its capacity to produce a direct economic gain (i.e. generation of revenues). These results suggest that farmers may not be optimising the use of their heritage assets, indicating the need to increase efforts to capture some economic gains.

The negative association between off-farm employment and intrinsic and utilitarian motivations behind heritage preservation may be due to limited resources to invest in these efforts or because their income is mostly dependent on their off-farm employment. This result is worrisome though

because off-farm employment as a supplementary – and even a primary – source of income is an increasing trend in the USA (USDA, 2013); therefore such overall disinterest could have negative implications for rural heritage preservation. Although off-farm employment is commonly treated as a risk-mitigating strategy, it may also be triggering disengagement from the practice of farming and its associated values (e.g. rural heritage preservation).

Results indicate that historical endowments on large farms accumulated on-site and likely over the course of several generations are not being utilised. This means that farmers are missing the opportunity to economically gain from these resources, either directly (e.g. charging for visiting an exhibit) or indirectly (e.g. capturing more visitors). This is problematic because the high costs needed to preserve some of these resources, especially buildings, may risk their loss due to severe deterioration. The negative correlation found between farm location and utilitarian reasons for preserving heritage suggests a strong effort among peri-urban farms to capture urban dwellers seeking a variety of cultural experiences, including those associated with rural heritage. Additionally, this study suggests that as farm visitor numbers increase, agritourism farmers become more committed to pursuing profitability by optimising the economic use of their resources, including heritage assets. They also tend to be more comprehensive in their tourism offerings and, thus, become more specialised in tourism.

Concluding remarks

This study advances our incipient awareness of the agritourism–heritage linkage by concluding that agritourism appears as a suitable tool to preserve rural tangible heritage, especially given the cultural and personal value these resources represent for farmers. However, to make this preservation sustainable it is advisable that agritourism farmers increase their efforts to economically gain from their heritage assets. They could do so by displaying antique farming tools in a visible way or informing visitors about historic buildings by posting educational signs. It is also recommended that heritage resources be properly advertised through the farm's marketing efforts, especially since visitors tend to prefer historic elements in the landscape when visiting farm settings (Gao, Barbieri, & Valdivia, 2013; Hong, Kim, & Kim, 2003).

The inverse relationship found between certain characteristics (specifically off-farm employment and farm size) and tangible heritage preservation is worrisome. National statistics show an increasing trend in off-farm employment (USDA, 2013), which may jeopardise the preservation of historical agricultural buildings and equipment due to reduced capital or disengagement with the farm. Similarly, the increasing integration of farms into large corporations across the country (O'Donoghue, Vasavada, MacDonald, & Sullivan, 2011) can threaten the preservation of tangible heritage due to sanitary or productivity concerns. Therefore, policies promoting the increase of on-farm revenues (e.g. technical assistance, cooperative marketing efforts) may not only keep family farms in business, but may also protect rural heritage.

Aimed at stimulating further curiosity in the agritourism–heritage linkage, this research note also delineates issues that need to be further investigated, namely: (1) the economic role of agritourism in heritage preservation, controlling for the specialisation continuum of the operation in terms of number of visitors, activities offered, and farmers' off-farm employment; and (2) a more comprehensive identification of the contributing and constraining factors driving heritage

preservation among agritourism farms. This study focused on understanding the role of agritourism in tangible heritage preservation. However, it is recommended that future studies take a step further by investigating the synergies between both phenomena, that is, by also examining the role of existing tangible heritage in the development and performance of agritourism endeavours.

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