

New Opportunities of Valorising Animal Produce: Turning Animal Farms into Educational Agrotouristic Farms

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Abstract

Being a relatively new domain, educational agri-tourism activity involves a number of factors influencing its development: knowledge of the economic, social and cultural domain limits but in the same time accurate information about farm availability to receive children and/or people with special needs. For this paper was created a questionnaire (with 19 items) for farmers in order to find if there is availability to develop and to change their farm in a certain way - to educate new generation through the relation with animals life and care, eating natural food and being creative in the nature. This questionnaire was applied to 60 farmers from the Timiș County and the answers have shown that many of them (95%) are willing to receive person with special needs and there are farmers which think they don't have anything to offer to develop and strengthen some certain traits in children personality and about the advantages for parents, teachers and local community.

Keywords: agritainment, community development, education, farmer.

1. Introduction

Tourism, no matter its nature, can also overlap education since, through the experiences intermediated by travel, allows tourists to mould a harmonious personality. It can be subordinated to the system of permanent education defined as the ensemble of learning experiences supplied by society during the entire life. Education through tourism starts in the family, goes on during school, and end with the end of life [1].

Agritourism as a form of tourism includes a very wide variety of activities that can be done by those who stay or just visit an agritourism farm: picking fruit, buying produce directly from the farmer, feeding animals, picking maize, planting vegetables, and picking vegetables.

There is much demand for simplified holidays, with avoidance of tourism sites by excellence, and with emphasis rather on regions or small corners

than on countries, with new opportunities for tourism in rural or underdeveloped areas or for cultural tourism [2].

There are a few fundamental features of agritourism that differentiate it from traditional tourism: the entire tourism consumption goes on in the rural area; tourism offer is original, varied, and personalised, and it is organised and operated by farmers (the village people); it is centred on tourism services supplied by the farmer-owned household or farm; it does not require high investments for infrastructure and tourism facilities [3, 4].

Whether the farm is centred on education or on entertainment (or, why not, on both), the farmer needs to know how to organise properly, how to supply food (if possible, from the local cuisine), and how to meet visitors' expectations during their stay at the farm. This can be seen as a "bridge" between the two activities – production and processing of produce from one's own farm, fields that can be harmoniously combined with tourism [5].

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When the visitors are schoolchildren, a farmer need to appeal to teachers from the local school to organise safe educational, entertainment, or educational-entertainment activities if he wants the teachers to come back to his farm or to recommend it to other schools.

Direct experience allows children to use all their senses to learn: the more they see, smell, hear, taste, and touch, the more they learn: this allows them to understand and to remember more and better. Even the simplest aspects of life and work on a farm is a valuable experience for the young schoolchild – composting, picking fruit and vegetables, milking animals (cows, sheep, and she-goats), digging ditches, pulling weeds – tourism at the farm is an “incredible educational instrument” [6].

In the case of animal farms or of “mini-zoo” agritourism farms for children, the most popular type of agritourism activity is “let’s take care of the preferred pets”, a type of educational tourism for little tourists that can bring extra income for the farmers. In order to improve the tourism sector and given the on-going mutations in the field, we think that tourists should be developed as consumers with focus on the following aspects: increasing input, better educated tourists, more experienced tourists (the role of the parents and of the school during the period of development of the personality, who should offer the children as many opportunities to experience new and diversified situations), increased cultural diversity, a stronger exposure to farm tourism information promoted through the media [7].

2. Material and method

Because of the economic issues our country is confronted with, the opening towards new sectors or fields of activity can represent a solution of compromise or the development of a potential that is considered unexploited. To do so, we applied a questionnaire to 60 farmers from the Timiș County (Romania), to see how they see this new type of tourism activity – educational and/or entertainment tourism.

The questionnaire contains 19 items – 10 open questions and 9 close questions – that aimed at the following aspects: level of information in the field of “agritainment”, the opening to new educational activities, the availability of hosting people with special needs, the identification of specialised

people who could help them, as well as the impact all this could have on the children, on their teachers, on their parents and, last but not least, on the local community.

The questionnaire was filled in by the animal breeders before and after attending training courses. Sixteen of the farmers are women and 44 are men aged 18-67, the mean age being about 33. The hypotheses of the present research were as follows:

- there are few information on the people that can be involved in educational farm tourism;
- there are elements of natural and cultural heritage that can be supplied to the farm visitors;
- there are numerous animal farms that can offer proper conditions of educational visits.

3. Results and discussion

Because of the large number of items in the questionnaire, we have picked up only those items that are relevant for the present paper.

1st question: “If you chose to turn your animal farm into an educational agritourism farm, who would be the specialised people you think you should cooperate with?”

The answers to this item (open) point to a very wide range of fields and specialists. We have noted the focus of 23 questionnaires on a single specialist, which means that the entire responsibility belongs to a single field (or specialist), which is not acceptable because education on a farm implies the cooperation of specialists from different fields. In 11 questionnaires, they suggested 2 specialists; in 5 questionnaires, they indicated 3 specialists; and only 2 questionnaires captured the complex field of farm education. We need to point out that a large number of respondents (19) did not answer this question. This could be taken as disinterest in the questionnaire topic or in the field of education on the farm; or it could be taken as the effect of the lack of information related to the role and responsibility of each specialist apart, as well as on the types of activities one can do while visiting an educational farm [8].

This is the list of specialists the respondents indicated in their questionnaires, together with the number of occurrences: the teachers (10 occurrences), the specialists in farm tourism (9 occurrences), the farmers (8 occurrences), the

engineers (7 occurrences), agricultural consultancy (6 occurrences), the priest, the vet, and the mayor (4 occurrences each), the school master, a technician, and a tradesman (3 occurrences each), the parents (2 occurrences), and travel agency, a professor from the Faculty of Zootechnics, anybody, the cooperative, and a psychologist (1 occurrence each).

From the quantitative analysis of the responses draws attention the presence of the priest which had a privileged position in a rural community since time immemorial. He is regarded as a spiritual representative and as an educated man, whose recommendation or suggestion is regarded with respect. Mention of the first places, professionals in education and tourism, also reveals a strong understanding of the role and their responsibilities. Other responses are worth mentioning: the presence of a psychologist (for the event equestrian therapy) and a professor in the Faculty of Animal Husbandry (which is trust in specialist at the highest level).

2nd question: “Would you agree to adapt your farm to be visited by people with special needs (physical and/or psychological disabilities)?”

To this item, 47 of the respondents (78.33%) answered affirmatively and 13 respondents (21.66%) answered negatively, which points to an increased tolerance towards the less favoured, even if this supposes the existence of special conditions. These children require a specially structure in which they can learn new activities and develop self-monitory ability [9].

3rd question: “If YES, what facilities do you think you should offer them?”

None of the 19 respondents who have given positive answers to the previous question responded to this question: this could be taken as a case of reticence from the respondents who would like to admit people with special needs on their farms but cannot put ideas into practice or do not know the specific requirements of this category of people.

In other 28 questionnaires, the respondents mentioned most facilities necessary to receive people with special needs on a farm: facilitated access (slope), alleys fit for wheel-chairs, toilets adapted to the needs of such people, visitors’ safety, and equestrian therapy facilities.

Figure 1 presents the facilities that could be supplied by the farmers to visitors with special

needs as well as the number of occurrences for each response.

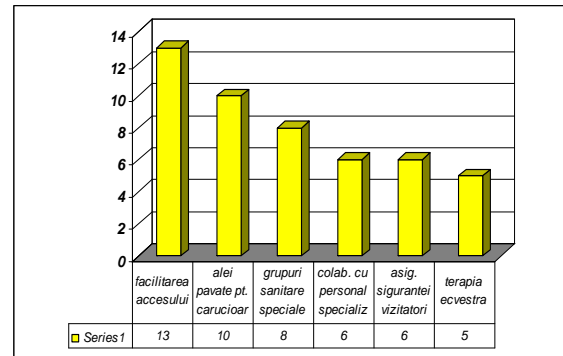


Figure 1. Facilities that could be supplied by the farmers to visitors with special needs

4th question: “What would be the advantages of an educational farm for your locality?”

The multiple choices supplied by the questionnaire were as follows:

- 1) developing a network for the distribution of commodities;
- 2) motivating the efforts of conservation of endangered rural, traditional culture;
- 3) supporting the farmers with a view to get supplementary incomes;
- 4) turning abandoned or isolated villages into living places.

The respondents were asked to number the answers in a preferential order, and the results are the following: answer 4 ranked 1st which points to the “ageing” of many rural localities that lack children, music, and other activities specific to younger generations, and that could be changed due to educational farms. Answer 2 ranks 2nd which could speak of the deep desire of the people in the rural area of perpetuating traditions and authentic values, abandoned in favour of “borrowings” from other cultures because of the migration of the population to urban areas.

Answer 1 ranks 3rd which could be seen as a supplementary opportunity of valorising farm produce to a segment of population difficult to reach because of transportation conditions.

Answer 3 ranks 4th: this shows the wish to invest long term where the interests of the community (traditions, values) are above personal interests (supplementary incomes).

4. Conclusions

Analysing the answers supplied by the farmers, we can see a real opening to educational agritourism farms, but information in the field are relatively few, which supposes the popularisation of a guide containing useful information that popularise good educational ideas: these ideas have already been implemented on agritourism farms in countries with tradition in the field, where farmers are encouraged to receive school-age tourists and overnights stays for children are facilitated. Such guides supply agritourism farm owners with practical, efficient ideas for the planning and organisation of stays for schoolchildren. It is obvious that teachers that wish to organise school trips to agritourism farms can improve class management using a guide such as recommended by Rosman & Kraus [8].

In order to encourage farmers to turn their animal farms into educational agritourism farms, we need to inform them about the existence of natural or cultural heritage in the close to their farms or in the neighbourhood and that could be exploited from both an educational (historical, geographical, biological information) and an organisational point of view (entertainment for the little visitors, safety of the activities) [10].

This paper is a pilot study concerning the opportunities of cooperation, of interfacing the schools that wish to supply as diversified experiences as possible from the point of view of the education of children and of the farmers who have both authentic produce and products to offer and valuable traditions (folk art, folklore, traditions) but not people interested in receiving information (many villages have old populations).

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