

DEVELOPING AGRI-TOURISM IN NOVA SCOTIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction

Agri-tourism or farm tourism is increasingly recognized as an important alternative farming activity that diversifies the economic base, provides educational opportunities to tourists, and provides greater community cohesion (Ilbery, Bowler, Clark, Crockett & Shaw, 1998). Although defining farm tourism has proven difficult (Holdnak & Pennington-Gray, 2000), it is generally understood that farm tourism should account for at least 25% of the farming operations revenue and serve as the secondary focus of operation. Farm tourism activities can include farm markets, wineries, U-Picks, farming interpretive centres, farm-based accommodation and events, and farm-based festivals. In a recent Nova Scotia Agriculture and Marketing document, agri-tourism was recognized as a significant farming activity in Nova Scotia but poorly understood (Nova Scotia Agriculture & Marketing, 2000). As a result, Nova Scotia Agriculture and Marketing has established a provincial working group to study farm tourism and its potential for development and promotion by Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture. This paper reports on the findings of a pilot project, which sought to identify the issues and challenges of developing agri-tourism in Nova Scotia from the perspective of stakeholder groups. As agri-tourism is a relatively new concept in Nova Scotia, this study represents an exploratory approach with the intention of bringing to light potential issues and challenges that future agri-tourism development must address.

Literature Review

Periodically the plight of the family farm in Nova Scotia and its repercussions to rural social, economic and personal well-being is explored in the popular press but the broader academic literature examining this issue and possible ameliorating strategies is surprising sparse both for Nova Scotia and for Canada. One recent exception is a paper by Telfer (2001) who examined the Niagra Region's wine route. Worldwide the academic literature seems to have shown a greater interest and much of that literature debates the need for economic and social diversification. For example, in the USA a study by Nickerson, Black and McCool (2001) suggests "increasing financial strains on family farms/ranches have put pressure on these businesses to look outside agriculture as a means to sustain the operation". Their study completed a 'principal components analysis' focusing on social and economic reasons as well as the external influences for agri-tourism. A cluster analysis identified 61% of the respondents who predominantly diversified for economic reasons, 23% who diversified due to reasons external to the operation, and 16% who diversified for social, economic, and external reasons. An additional study (Holdnak & Pennington-Gray, 2000) used a case study approach that emphasized the strategies a citrus fruit farm based in Florida implemented to diversify their operations in order to maintain its viability.

In Europe there is substantially more academic interest in agri-tourism as a means of diversifying family farm income and interest in its impacts on family social structure (Clark, 1999). In the United Kingdom for example, Agro Business Consultants Limited publishes a twice-yearly digest that provides various sensitivity analyses on agricultural activity including farm tourism/leisure enterprise gross margins. Given the growth and acceptance of farm tourism as a viable alternative to traditional farm-based activities nationally and internationally, it is surprising that this tourism activity has received little attention from Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture.

Methods

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a focus group and interviews served as the primary methods of data collection, which occurred between August and October 2001. Focus group and interview participants included key stakeholders such as farmers, municipal officials, community members, representatives from Nova Scotia Agriculture and Marketing, and individuals from Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture. Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was implemented to encourage participation by all members and to prioritise issues. A total of 16 individuals participated in this study although only 10 people participated in the focus group. In addition, the majority of research participants including the author participated in a 2-day agri-tourism familiarization trip entitled "Fields, Farms and Vineyards" sponsored by a regional tourism association. This trip served to identify the research participants and to begin a dialogue on the issues related to agri-tourism development in Nova Scotia.

Results

A cursory overview of the results denotes the issues arising from the focus group and the interviews. These are outlined below and represent a thematic approach for the purposes of this paper.

Product Development

A consistent concern was the lack of agri-tourism products and the consistency in quality of the agri-tourism product. Relatively few agri-tourism operations are market-ready. Consensus existed regarding the inability to define the types of products that constitute agri-tourism. There was strong support for the development of industry standards developed by Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture for other tourism sectors despite the lack of recognition agri-tourism has received from this provincial tourism agency.

Partnership and Communication

A lack of awareness is evident among farmers of the value-added opportunities of agri-tourism development. Likewise, many stakeholders believed that an overall lack of awareness of the agri-tourism sector by the public exists. Partnerships with regional tourism associations and agri-tourism direct-market associations were suggested as venues for mitigating the lack of communication among farmers and the public. A mentorship program between existing agri-tourism operators and those considering agri-tourism was suggested as a strategy for promoting this type of product development.

Government Support

Government support at the municipal and provincial level is lacking. Issues such as signage and zoning bylaws were noted as significant obstacles to agri-tourism development. Stakeholders wanted government to buy in to agri-tourism as a viable tourism sector and to promote agri-tourism in its marketing campaigns although there was consensus that the agri-tourism industry must first clearly define its products and provide consistent high quality experiences.

Marketing

Stakeholders indicated there was a lack of information regarding tourism markets and trends. Farmers wanted to define target markets and find effective marketing methods for reaching their target market. Greater awareness of the relationship between product and market match was noted as a significant issue. Stakeholders agreed that it was necessary to determine and clarify the position of agri-tourism relevant to other notable Nova Scotia tourism attractions.

Education and Training

Despite the opportunities that agri-tourism can provide in terms of its value-added potential, most farmers in Nova Scotia are unaware of this alternative. Even if farmers become aware of this opportunity, they lack the time to pursue the specific skills required to diversify their farming operations. A resource guide that included basic information on agri-tourism including an assessment tool useful for reviewing skills and tourism assets was strongly articulated by the stakeholders.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is apparent that numerous obstacles impede the development of agri-tourism in Nova Scotia. Unlike other tourism sectors that have clearly articulated products and services in addition to strong associations that offer support, many agri-tourism operators and potential agri-tourism operators lack the assistance or the knowledge required to develop market-ready products. Because of the state of the agri-tourism industry, Nova Scotia Tourism and Culture appear reluctant to embrace and to endorse agri-tourism in their marketing campaigns. This lack of support impedes the development of agri-tourism products and services and perpetuates the cycle of poorly developed and marketed products by farmers not familiar with the many skills required to develop and operate an effective tourism business.

Although the discussion of agri-tourism is relatively new in Nova Scotia, people have been participating in farm-based activities for a considerable length of time. Present day circumstances, however, make diversifying farm-based operations a necessity. Agri-tourism is an obvious alternative and Nova Scotia is well positioned to offer authentic agri-tourism experiences incorporating a wide variety of activities. This study represents an initial exploration into the issues and challenges related to agri-tourism development in Nova Scotia. Additional research is required in order to develop insights that will support the future development of agri-tourism in Nova Scotia.

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