

Recreational Opportunities through Agritourism Increases Relationships within Urban and Rural Communities in Western Balkan Societies

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Abstract: To achieve more economic diversification, the rural people are increasingly turning to tourism to supplement their incomes. This article examines rural agritourism in Western Balkan countries, emphasizing the management of structures and the diversification of services. A questionnaire survey was conducted with owners and managers of rural agritourism facilities in the Balkan countries, and the results were compiled into the final report. Rural agritourism is the principal activity for most of the questioned operators. Visitors are drawn to the region by the local cuisine and beverages, the many services available, the natural surroundings, and the beauty of the scenery. These are also the kind of resources that might be employed in the future to develop rural tourist activities. Agriculture-based rural tourism institutions offer a diverse variety of goods and services such as lodging and food, recreational activities, and the planning of festivals, particularly during the summer months. The majority of them provide cuisine that is characteristic of the area. They promote their products and services using a variety of channels and methods, including the internet, billboards, and advertising, but they also depend on client referrals. Balkan countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina have tremendous potential for growing rural tourism, which may open up new doors of opportunity for the country's rural districts, but this potential has gone mostly untapped. For rural tourism to reach its full potential, the public's support is essential. We will analyze the relationships agritourists have built-in both rural and urban setups using the data.

Keywords: Agritourism; Agriculture; Relationships; Urban and Rural; Western Balkan Societies Education.

JEL Classification: Q18, Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

The western Balkan communities can be used as an example of a transitional society. So, this study examines contemporary concerns surrounding the function and growth of agritourism's influence in those countries. It looks at a wide range of elements that influence the development and transformation of agritourism. It also checks on agritourism's impacts, which includes creating relationships (Ackovska *et al.*, 2016). Problems with data plague most critical evaluations of agritourism growth, but they are especially noticeable in this region of Europe since few document data points can be used to construct a cohesive overall picture of the phenomena. Because of the disintegration of the 'Eastern bloc', the global economic and financial crisis in such countries was severe (Zirker, 2019). The countries suffered from poor development status, low economic growth rates, and high unemployment rates (Jeločnik *et al.*, 2020).

Modern research on the evolution of worldwide visitor trends has shown that agritourism is becoming a more critical industry component. Currently, this type of tourism enjoys significant advantages in the international tourism

market because it has already played an essential role in the economic and social development of some rural areas that were previously socially and economically depressed (Toirxonovna, 2016). The astonishing number of 200,000 recognized registered service providers in agritourism in Europe shows. Together they supply more than 2,000,000 beds; agritourism is a significant component of the European tourism industry (Zawadka, 2014). Because of the reduction in conventional agricultural subsidies, agritourism is becoming more critical as multiple types of diversification help rural communities maintain a sustainable economic base in economic hardship (Roman *et al.*, 2017). Agritourism is a significant contributor to multifunctional rural development in Western Balkan countries, as it is in many other European countries (Ciolac *et al.*, 2020). The transformation of Balkan countries' social, economic, and political systems at the start of the new century heralds the beginning of a new chapter in agritourism development. This kind of tourism should be one of the primary carriers of tourist offers in all Western Balkan Countries and a factor in the development of rural regions on an integrated basis (Adamov *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, the primary focus of this study is the investigation of how agritourism activities affect rural and urban surroundings in a typical transitional Balkan community during the transition

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Table 1. Motives for Agritourism in Two Balkan Countries: Montenegro and Croatia

Motives	Montenegro	Croatia	Structure	Average	Pondered value according to number of ha
	%	%	%	ha	
Sale of own products, easier marketing	85.5	54.5	70.0	124.5	85.15
Income increase	5.5	20.0	12.75	44.75	5.6
Reduction of agricultural production risks	1.8	7.3	4.55	86.5	3.9
Employment for family members	1.8	9.1	5.45	21.83	1.2
Other	5.5	9.1	7.3	22.4	1.63

from communism and socialism to the capitalist age (Shimbov, 2016).

Recreational activities are the most powerful techniques for increasing farmer incomes and promoting long-term sustainability in rural areas. Two critical challenges are the capacity to manage agricultural resources sensibly and rapidly produce a variety of foods and non-food products (Barbieri *et al.*, 2016). Cost reductions that may be realized due to the co-existence of various activities might benefit the production of value by agritourism farmers and ranchers. Specifically, this article aims to look at the technological efficiency of agritourism and recreational activities in Western Balkan countries.

2. AGRITOURISM IN BALKAN COUNTRIES

A thorough evaluation of secondary data and primary data acquired via structured questionnaires presented to owners and managers of agritourism facilities in Western Balkan countries formed the basis of this report. The surveys address the different concerns relating to rural agritourism structures and data about respondents (such as their name, age, education level, employment, and municipality). A description of the facility, including its location and type (campground site, country residence, farmhouse, holiday cottage, rural resort), the number of female and gender staff, the key customers, if agritourism is the essential business, whether agritourism is a familial or clan business, the high season, profit-making, the provision of traditional food goods, the items and activities offered, such as recreational engagements and event planning, the most significant difficulties experienced and plans to diversify the operation (Lupi *et al.*, 2017).

The region under investigation has a variety of rural and urban tourist enterprises and constructions of various sorts. Examples are cottages, homes, flats, small hotels, youth hostels, camping grounds, motels, restaurants, horse farms, and tourist agencies. Foreign roaming tourists and residents and visitors from other Balkan countries make up the customer at most agritourism centers (Peštek *et al.*, 2020). Agrotourism is the principal activity and the fundamental source of income for most of the owners and managers of rural tourist enterprises who were questioned (86.7%). As a bonus, rural tourism is a family enterprise for a significant portion (45.5%). In general, agrotourism, in particular, is more upgraded in Bosnia than in the other Balkan countries under consideration. Agrotourism is seen as a lucrative enterprise by most interviewed (87.8%) (Puska *et al.*, 2020). According to the managers of agrotourism structures, visitors are drawn

to the region by the following factors: traditional foods and beverages, a diverse service offering, the splendor of the natural environment and the terrain, the quality of services, the quality of food, and the region's architectural and cultural heritage. Agriculture, forestry, and rural tourism contribute to establishing employment in rural areas (Dziamulych *et al.*, 2020). In reality, the number of workers in the examined agrotourism institutions rises as high as 20 individuals. Taking gender into mind, the average number of female workers is 2.2 (with a maximum of 15), while the average number of male employees is 3.1 (with a maximum of 15). One of the significant problems in managing rural agritourism facilities is a lack of financial resources. Other challenges include a high level of VAT and other taxes and a low number of tourists during the winter months (Mahmoodi *et al.*, 2022). Other challenges encountered by agritourism providers include purchasing products, the maintenance of infrastructure, a lack of skilled people, a lack of assistance from local authorities, a convoluted legal framework and regulations, and out-of-date infrastructure and equipment, shown on the Table 1 (Despotović *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, agrotourism continues to be primarily a seasonal business. In reality, summer is the busiest season for 80 percent of the respondents. In comparison, winter (11.1 percent) is the most active season for certain tourist businesses situated in or near hilly areas (Călina *et al.*, 2017). Tourism development in Western Balkan countries requires the consolidation of a more hospitable climate for tourist investment; an enhanced support system and infrastructure; higher standards, services, and infrastructural facilities for rural tourism; a more coordinated marketing and promotion strategy and among other things, better integration of tourism with broader rural development programs. Traditional villages, agricultural resources, natural resources (forests, streams, rivers, lakes, mountains, caves), cultural heritage (rural folklore) and old buildings (churches, monasteries, traditional houses), existing tourism facilities (hotels, ski centers, horse farms), and traditional food and cuisine are among the assets that could be utilized in the coming years for the development of agrotourism, according to the interviewees. While some agritourism institution owners and managers claim that there are few tourist destinations at the level of towns because many were damaged during the civil war, this is not generally agreed upon (Kazmina *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, several current difficulties restrict the expansion of tourism, for instance, inadequate quality of infrastructure and services. It was recommended that the managers of agritourism structures increase investment in rural

Table 2. Various Services Provided by Agrotourism in Western Balkan Countries.

Service category	Examples	Percentage of Structures Offering the Service Category
Accommodation		26.7%
Food		71.1%
Recreational activities	Horse riding, carriage rides, swimming pools, gym, beauty salon, hunting and fishing. Skiing, excursions and trips, hiking, visits to mills shipping in Drina canyon	20.0%
Organization of celebrations	Religious celebrations, birthdays, graduations, baptisms, weddings, sport celebrations, dinners for hunters, celebration of the International women’s day (8 march), different types of parties	40.0%

tourism and socio-economic development in rural areas, better market travel via various media (e.g. brochures, internet), develop new tourist destinations, and improve service levels to attract more visitors to their communities (Nezirović and Avdić, 2019; Nezirović, 2020).

3. AGRITOURISM BUSINESS AND SERVICES

Only 24.5% of the respondents intend to expand their agritourism businesses by providing new services such as tourist transportation, tennis, and football playgrounds, producing their dairy and meat products. Putting tickets on sale, establishing a horse-riding farm, constructing cottages, mini-ethnic villages, and meeting rooms, or simply doubling the number of rooms (Petrovic *et al.*, 2017). This is most likely due to the difficulties mentioned above.

According to the respondents, integrating recreational activities into agritourism for them tends to improve interactions. Aside from providing housing, agritourism structures currently offer various goods and services, including food, recreational activities, and the planning of celebrations and other special events (Table 2).

In terms of cuisine, several adjustments are being implemented to meet tourists’ requirements and preferences better. The internalization of farm multifunctionality in rural agritourism operations is often hampered by difficulty in the general case. However, among the genuine farm multifunctions, recreational and educational functions are the best suitable for farm diversification or institutionalization by individual agricultural operations due to the relative ease with which these functions may be translated into service products. For once, people will be flowing from the urban areas to rural areas for better opportunities, according to the respondents (Jusufi and Ukaj, 2020). The relationship between the urban and rural setups has been increasing since the introduction of agrotourism.

Table 2 (Feliciano *et al.*, 2018) shows the services provided by agritourism institutions in most parts of the Western Balkan Countries. Services are classified into the following categories: Accommodations account for 26.7% of the total, while 71.1 percent of the population consumes food. Recreational activities include; Horse stables and camel rides, swimming pools, and a hair salon; fishing and hunting; excursions and tours; hiking; visiting mills; and shipping in the Drina Canyon, encompassing 20.0 percent of the total (Nezi-

rović and Avdić, 2019). Celebrations that include religious festivals, birthdays, graduations, baptisms, marriages, sports celebrations, feasts for hunters, and International Women’s Day commemoration account for 40.0 percent of the total.

Due to the diversification of agritourism activities, there is an increasing need for rural tourism focused on visitors’ experiences. Agritourism is a service product that is directly exchanged between producers and customers instead of other service goods. Furthermore, expanding the range of available services necessitates new partnerships and collaborations. Many services supplied are coordinated in collaboration with other players, including additional food and tourist facilities, relevant councils (e.g., municipal councils), community groups, non-governmental agencies, and tourism organizations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). Most of these organizations are located in urban areas. Rural agritourism creates networks of individuals extending beyond the local community’s boundaries and into the urban areas (Evgrafova *et al.*, 2020). These networks facilitate the identification of new community resources and, eventually, the creation of new operations that may be turned into rural agritourism products and services. Three-quarters of the rural agritourism establishments assessed provide cuisine that is characteristic of the area. The list of typical and local agro-food products changes from one municipality to another. However, the following tend to be expected; roasted lamb and pork meat, various types of cheeses, cornbreads, multiple soups, cheese pie (Kajmak), smoked meats, milk, doughnuts and gruel, potatoes, freshwater fish and polenta, Vlasenica steaks, fruits, and vegetables, rolled kebabs, scrambled eggs, and so on (Krsteva-Blagoeva and Bogueva, 2021). There are several benefits to agritourism in general, compared to agriculture. It brings a big primary industry, agriculture, closer to a significant service sector, tourism, resulting in a win-win scenario for both sectors. This is to say. The tourist sector has the potential to grow, and the agricultural sector can absorb the growth in the tourism sector (Romanov *et al.*, 2017). One sector was meant for the urban setup, while the other was meant for the rural setup. A combination of both has increased interactions and relationships between the people of Balkan countries over the last few years. Urban marketers have introduced social media marketing to the rural agritourism centers that used to depend on word-of-mouth to succeed (Table 3) (Despotović *et al.*, 2017).

Table 3. Socio-Demographic Structure of Agrotourism Community in Two Balkan Countries; Montenegro and Croatia.

Socio-Demographic Data on Holdings		Montenegro	Croatia	Structure	Average	Pondered Value According to Number of ha
		%	%	%	ha	ha
Sex	Male	90.0	68.0	78.4	37.7	29.6
	Female	10.0	32.0	21.6	282.2	61.0
Age	15-30	3.3	94.0	50.4	167.6	84.5
	31-50	51.6	6.15	28.0	11.07	3.3
	51-65	33.3	0	16.0	13.8	2.2
	65+	11.8	0	5.6	12.7	0.7
Educational Structure of the Population						
Elementary incomplete		3.30	-	1.6	14.5	0.2
Elementary education completed		18.30	3.30	8.8	13.5	1.2
Secondary education completed		63.30	85.30	82.4	107.1	88.3
College, University degree		15.0	11.40	7.2	12.0	0.9
Master of Science, Doctor of Philosophy		-	-	-	-	-
Occupation						
Agricultural producer		63.30	58.90	63.6	16.4	5.5
Pensioner		7.60	10.78	3.2	4.2	0.1
Other		29.10	30.32	33.2	130.9	82.7
Residential status						
Smaller village (population up to 500)		55.0	43.0	48.8	136.7	66.7
Medium-sized village (population 500-1000)		3.30	26.5	12.	49.8	6.0
Larger village (population 2000-5000)		36.7	27.5	23.2	19.1	4.4
Larger town (population 5000-10000)		5.0	3.0	16	83.55	13.4

Rural agritourism offers a great deal of promise to help rural families diversify their income and income diversification sources.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a result, rural agritourism has the potential to serve as a strategy for the long-term development of rural communities as well as a tool for product differentiation. When it comes to rural agritourism, one of the most frequent elements that should be presented to farmers as an incentive to consider beginning a tourist company is the possibility of earning an additional source of income. The development of tourism to broaden the economic basis of farmers and rural inhabitants has great promise. Several obstacles stand in the way of rural tourism development. Improvements in tourist standards, services, and infrastructure are required; a more favorable investment climate for rural tourism is instructed; support structures and facility capacities must be strengthened, and integration with general rural development plans must be improved.

Furthermore, it is necessary to operationalize the links between rural tourism and agriculture by building a closer partnership between rural tourist organizations and farmers in the region. Producers will be able to market their agro-food products more readily. At the same time, rural tourist operators will be able to broaden their service offerings by including tours and farm visits, for example. To achieve this, improvements in rural tourist establishment management and an increase in the level of professionalization of tourism managers are required.

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