

DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN AGROTOURISM: AN EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE IN SPANISH ESTABLISHMENTS

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Abstract

Increasing environmental consciousness is resulting more and more in a dramatic change in the way that products are perceived by customers and other stakeholders. Either business or administrations and nonprofits have to face threats at the same time that they try to take advantage of new market circumstances.

Most analyses in the field focus on goods and manufacturing industries –assuming that services have a minor impact on environment–. However, the services sector includes a real variety of activities and some of them could perform not so eco or nature friendly, even when they are clearly linked to natural resources, as agrotourism.

Research was conducted on environmental management strategies in agrotourism establishments located in the Spanish region of Castilla y León and perception on their barriers and benefits.

Keywords: Agrotourism, rural development, environment, management strategies, Spain.

INTRODUCTION

Politicians, practitioners and academics are claiming time ago the key role of tourism activities for rural development. Nevertheless, even when advantages from tourism and leisure activities in rural areas seem to be (so) clear, they all should remember on the major complexity of troubles and actions when related to local development, then these going further from mere economic or technological considerations to become active part of a global dynamics to change society as a whole, any activities and/or processes developed in a close linkage to those circumstances under which they come into practice and a wide range of factors (historical, cultural, educative, organizational, structural, etc.) finally determining the real capacity for generating and/or accepting an innovation by the economic agents in a concrete location (Naghiu, Vázquez and Georgiev, 2005).

According to such postulates, proper design of agrotourism strategies shall involve a selective expansion of tourist flows in order to intend one or more of previously defined goals. Concrete lists can be found in several contributions that, even when differing in appearance, use to share a common background (e.g. Jacobs, 1993; Roseland, 1996; Hall and Jenkins, 1998; or García, 2003).

As an example, Hall and Jenkins' (1998) taxonomy specifically consisted of five-categories as well as concrete references of related instruments, regarding to: i) the sustainability of previously existing local levels and sources of incomes, employment and growth, simultaneously to generation of new wealth sources; ii) contribution to payment of costs for providing that economic and social infrastructure directly or indirectly related to agrotourism activities and facilities; iii) encouragement of the development of primary and industrial sectors/activities at local level, as well as other services directly linked to tourism activities or not; iv) contribution to increase and diversification in amenities and services offered to local residents; and v) contribution towards an effective preservation of environmental and cultural resources (especially when being primary scenic/aesthetic tourist attractions, but at any case prevailing the idea of sustainability in designing and performing activities).

A wide range of policy instruments are available to policy makers to achieve these goals: regulatory instruments, voluntary instruments, direct expenditure, financial incentives, deliberated non-intervention... However, an adequate strategy should involve co-operation of private sector. Too many times agrotourism activities in private sector are considered as a "shortcut" to make easy money with customers and funds from public supporting programs. According to practical experience, this could not be so unrealistic, but it is a clear mistake, especially at medium and long term. Assessment of agrotourism results and achievements on the basis of unjustified expectative may become even worse when joined to ignorance or wilful neglect of local/regional planners, decision-makers and developers regarding potentially adverse –and often erroneously perceived– environmental and/or social effects of activities. Nevertheless, even when adverse impacts may, of course, turn into a reality, then curtailing of destroying benefits from its activities, agrotourism uses to contribute to the stabilization and development of rural economies, at least as offering a first business choice or at a first stage.

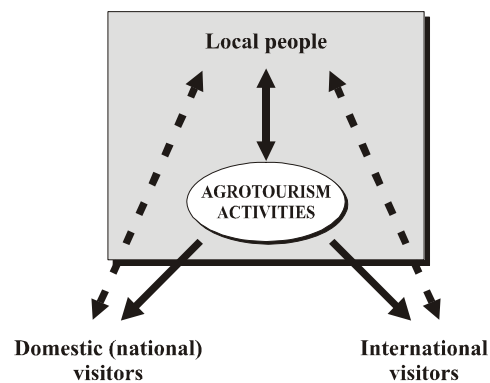
Thus, agrotourism must be considered like the complex plurality of multi-faced activities that it is in practice. As stated time ago by authors as Edwards (1991), it is not to be mere easy business or just a farm-based extra activity, but also to comprise concrete interest on nature and ecotourism, walking, climbing, camping, riding... holidays; and also adventure, sport and health habits, hunting and angling, educational travelling, arts and/or heritage liking, ethnic aspects, etc.

What is more, in transitional economies as Romanian one, agrotourism and related activities appear as especially appropriate tools to revitalize rural areas aiming a sustainable future through people retention and employment maintenance (or even job creation), as well as increasing

job diversity, retaining services, supporting farms exploitations, broadening cultural provision, and also by maintenance of landscape, nature resources, and rural art and handicraft as attractions for visitors (Naghiu, Vázquez and Georgiev, 2005).

By providing an incentive and an amount of necessary funding for infrastructure development, agrotourism also contributes to growth of other productive activities in rural areas. Moreover a specific benefit from agrotourism development in Romania should be an increasing number of opportunities for social interaction of local population (Figure 1), too often individuals living relatively isolated in agricultural based communities (Naghiu *et al.*, 2003).

Interactive relationships in local communities due to agrotourism activities



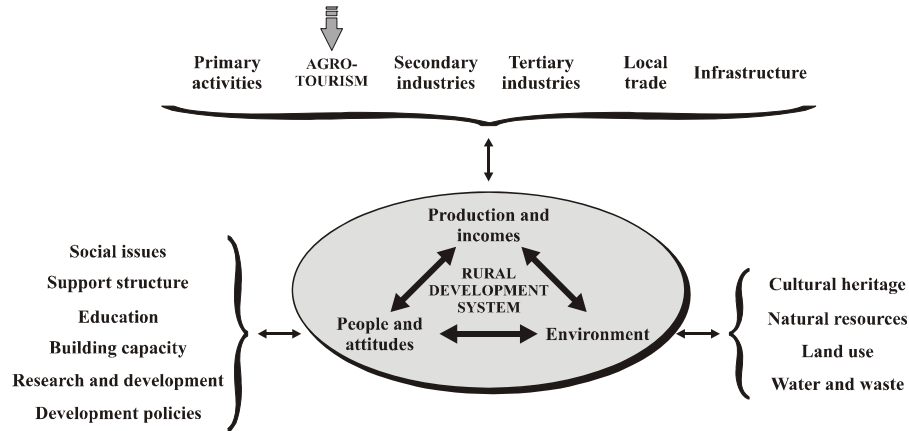
Source: Naghiu, Vázquez and Georgiev (2005).

Figure 1

According to country potential, agrotourism can be considered as one of key-tools for an ambitious and effective *rural development system* in Romania (see Figure 2), thus allowing a substantial contribution to the improvement of life quality, as far as (Naghiu, 2002; Naghiu *et al.*, 2003; Naghiu *et al.* 2004a and 2004b):

- i) The impact of agrotourism activities goes beyond rural areas. Rural economies interact with the national economy to shape a system of relationships between cities, suburbs, surrounding countryside, small towns and villages.
- ii) Agriculture and food production is undergoing due to a highly stressful process of economic reform and competitiveness after admission in the European market. Farming accounts for a small and declining share of rural employment and income.

Designing a rural development integrated system for Romania: a proposal



Source: Based on Naghiu *et al.* (2003).

Figure 2

iii) Agrotourism activities perform as a way of alternative income for farming communities either directly (by diversifying into, e.g., providing accommodation or holiday cottages for visitors) or indirectly through environmental stewardship to create and maintain the sort of countryside that visitors want to enjoy.

iv) Inhabitants in rural areas begin to realize that agrotourism not only concerns to tourism operators. For example, somebody in a short break in the countryside is not only paying for services from accommodation suppliers, but potentially buying from a huge number of assortment sources (leisure services, clothing, handicrafts and souvenirs, meals and drinks, etc.). All these might not show up in a statistic report on rural tourism, but they are there nonetheless.

v) Further from additional jobs and incomes, agrotourism provides a wide range of valuable social and cultural benefits to the population as a whole: from enjoyment of solace and relaxation, scenery, fresh air... to benefits brought by simply walking, awareness on the need to preserve all aspects of environment through wildlife study, maintenance of people's feeling of national, regional or local identity, etc.

vi) Adding value to agricultural products thanks to their inclusion as part of main and/or complementary agrotourism offer (e.g. as meals or as purchase goods) is an important chance for increasing life quality in rural areas.

vii) Agrotourism activities are able to put in value and support the "golden" very authentic traditions of Romanian people.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

As previously stated, research on environmental performing of tourism activities in rural areas is more and more required, especially when depending on a short of owned or common natural resources that are not for free or unlimited, as well as part of the environmental patrimony of the society as a whole.

However, in the case of Spain, such a kind of studies is not so usual. Most research related to tourism and environmental issues is focused on “general” or massive “*sun and beach*” tourism, probably due to its major impact on nature (in relative terms) and external pressures, even from an economic view, as risk of lack or non-sustainability of natural resources is underlined, then coming into decrease in attractiveness for visitants. At any case, authors as Aragón (1995a and 1995b) have stressed benefits of an “*environmentally friendly management*” in rural tourism activities of concrete municipalities, even when his results are highly conditioned, as referred to municipalities located in National Parks, where legal impositions are very hard. Others, as Díez de Velasco (2000), have claimed not only for a punishment system to avoid environmental degradation when aiming sustainable development, but they have even suggested a compulsory legal concern, by putting an environmental tax on tourism investments. In the Region of Castilla y León exploratory analyses on the perception of importance of environmental management strategies in agrotourism establishments, involved issues, derived benefits and barriers to implementation have been conducted since 2001 on by Vázquez and colleagues (see, e.g., Vázquez et al., 2002). A summary of the results from a more recent survey (2007) on a sample of 220 agrotourism businesses is presented in next pages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Castilla y León was one of first Spanish autonomous regions legislating rural tourism in 1993. However, the unexpected increase in activities determined the need of a new legal frame, under Decreto 84/1995 de 11 de Mayo (Decree 84/1995 of May 11th), which included three alternative denominations for establishments: “*casa rural*” (rural house), “*posada rural*” (rural inn) and “*centro de turismo rural*” (rural tourism centre).

Moreover, there is a double possibility of rural houses, distinguishing among those totally for hire (“*casa rural de alquiler*”) and those where accommodation is located in a specific area sharing facilities of a family house (“*casa rural de alojamiento compartido*”).

According to its specificities, agrotourism activities are developed especially in shared rural houses, as well as in rural tourism centres, as these both categories are expected to offer complementary activities related to farm tasks.

As considering a total figure of 1369 establishments, the above mentioned random sample size of 220 means an error level of $\pm 5.95\%$ (for a confidence level of 95.5%).

The assessment/consideration of environmental issues was made regarding four categories, as follows: i) capacity to have influence on business results; ii) importance of environmental protection; iii) aspects of environmental strategy; and iv) barriers to and opportunities from implementation of an environmental management system.

Influence of stakeholders (partners, guests, competitors, etc.) in agrotourism business was considered in groups i) and ii), as well as their final importance on environmental protection and management.

However, strategies appeared as more related to (avoid) barriers and (take advantage of) opportunities. Concrete results (see Table 1) show main bases when looking for an environmental awareness, either in case of owners and Administration (see Table 4). Average values are referred to a valuation Likert scale ranging from 0 to 10 points.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics		
B: Barriers / O: Opportunities	Average val.	St. deviation
B 01 Lack of information on environmental management tools	6.27	2.95
B 02 Lack of institutional support	6.84	2.55
B 03 Lack of qualified human resources / specialists	6.07	2.53
B 04 Lack of financial support	7.38	2.60
B 05 Lack of technical solutions for implementation	5.94	2.47
O 01 Increase in competitiveness	6.31	1.78
O 02 Improvement of corporate image	7.25	1.82
O 03 Costs saving at long term	7.47	1.74
O 04 Costs saving at short term	5.51	1.84
O 05 Benefits increase at long term	7.44	1.81
O 06 Benefits increase at short term	5.87	1.77
O 07 New opportunities for business	6.55	1.87
O 08 Increase in number of guests	6.45	1.82

Table 2

Matrix of components

B: Barriers / O: Opportunities	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
B 01 Lack of information on environmental management tools		.503	
B 02 Lack of institutional support		.817	
B 03 Lack of qualified human resources / specialists			.514
B 04 Lack of financial support		.836	
B 05 Lack of technical solutions for implementation		.569	
O 01 Increase in competitiveness	.782		
O 02 Improvement of corporate image	.708		
O 03 Costs saving at long term			
O 04 Costs saving at short term	.563		-.579
O 05 Benefits increase at long term	.736		
O 06 Benefits increase at short term	.696		
O 07 New opportunities for business	.728		
O 08 Increase in number of guests	.823		

At any case, most important issues when considering the chance to start environmental-friendly management actions are indicated. Specifically, the results of the factor analysis states of principal components were three factors to be stressed either by owners or authorities.

The first of these three factors allows us to suggest the importance of a strong belief of business owners related to positive influence of environmental management on business profit.

On the other hand, these same owners are reluctant to be confident of enough supporting programs in order to start a realistic, reliable and sustainable system to preserve environmental resources.

Finally, the third of the factors reflects the feeling of being alone or the lack of capacity to start on one's own resources such a kind of management in agrotourism establishments.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Obtained results suggest three main issues to be considered when designing public policies aiming implementation of environmental management practices in agrotourism businesses. These establishments, due to the nature and specificity in their offer, should be especially careful to promote such a kind of actions. A deep belief in a potential improvement of future benefits, as well as the perception of lack of institutional support and scarce own resources to put theory into practice are the three main pillars currently undergoing the agrotourism scenery.
2. At this point, only an adequate understanding about the real objectives and possibilities of agrotourism activities, as well as related strategic environmental management practices in European regions could allowance design and implementation of environmental strategies in involved establishments.
3. According to the opinion of business owners, one of main barriers in order to promote a suitable development of agrotourism aiming environmental respect and sustainability refers to the bad condition of a number of ways and transit spaces in rural areas. So, there is here an old claim for infrastructure time ago, then making possible the reception of tourists, but the real fact is that nature care has become a real concern, not only due to environmental reasons, but also taking in mind the use as resource for current guests as well as to attract visitors in future.
4. Knowledge about characteristics, actions, barriers and benefits of environmental management strategies allows concrete improvement actions, specifically designed to the context or case. A number of participants in the survey stated their belief on benefits of such a kind of actions (earnings, image...), but also underlined a lack of information or a lack of confidence in available resources to put them into practice on their own.
5. Thus, it seems to be clear that identification of opportunities will simplify the implementation of environmental management strategies, but fall of barriers becomes the right starting point to make it possible, also increasing self-confidence of business owners and, even, public responsables who are expected to support the agrotourism system.

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