

Learning Sustainability of Rural Tourism: Farm Competitiveness and Landscape Health Risk Assessment

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades, rural tourism has spread to all countries. This has been seen as part of an increasing farm diversification to solve the crisis of the agricultural sector. The prospect of financial grants has caused different kinds of interventions and effects on the landscape. The results have not always respected the sense of place, neither the identity of rural landscape recommendations of the Europe landscape convention.

Looking at the problems surveyed in the rural landscapes of Northern Italy, this paper reviews how to implement the principles of sustainable tourism to enhance working farms and local identity. It examines how those principles can be translated into practice, identifying new and innovative ways for individual operators and stakeholders.

A web page is introduced as interactive guide-lines for future practitioners. Identifying markers of sustainability which define the links between the farm and its environment, it guides to reusing old farm buildings, in a manner that is able to revitalise the agricultural landscape and/or promote novel alternatives to the tourism-residential function envisaged by the redevelopment policies currently in force. As Web-based decision support system for rural land, it assists the users in their day-to-day decisions on considering of the costs and the benefits for environment and landscape of alternative types of rural tourism businesses and helps planning authorities to develop a marketing project to expand forms of agri-tourisms able to creating employment and increasing the appeal of agriculture to younger generations.

Keywords: Rural tourism, decision support system, governance, land use sustainability assessment, landscape, rural land use planning, web technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite considerable government support, incomes from farming have fallen sharply in recent years. The number of farmers in the European Union has fallen by half over the past 20 years, from 12,7 million to just over 6 millions (Gumbel, 2004). Over the last years, as a result of government initiatives, tourism has been seen as an agent for rural economic revitalisation, as a commercially viable way for farmers to earn a living while safeguarding the rural environment. This is necessary in order to create employment and to promote the socio-economic development of the poorer areas (Cambridge, 1987). In Norway, there are 32 farms promoted as “active holidays” (NBG, 2007). In Sweden, 20% of the farms are

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registered as agri-tourism businesses (Bo på Lantgård, 2007). In Finland, 70 % of the tourism entrepreneurs have a farm (RTI, 2006). In Estonia, there are 850 rural tourism accommodation establishments (E.C.G. of the Republic of Estonia, 2004). In Italy, the farms involved in tourism are more than 1600 (Associazione naz. per l'agriturismo, 2006). In Britain, tourism supports 380,000 jobs in rural areas, contributing to rural economic output with £14bn (Arnold, 2004).

These numbers conceal various forms of rural tourism which often have nothing to do with agriculture. In order to understand the different effects of these forms in Italy since the '80s, tourism in the countryside begins to be identified in terms of the activities being carried out within the working farm perimeter. This is called "agri-tourism". In order to support the economic life of the farm, it has to be complementary to its normal agricultural activities, without replacing them. In theory, rural tourism and agri-tourism have only the environmental context in common, but they should be differentiated for their specific goals, as well as for the reference laws and financial grants. In practice, agri-tourism often sacrifices the farm to the benefits of the tourists, thus it becomes more similar to rural tourism for looking at income. "Rural tourism," as it's known in Italy, defines various forms of rural lodging in countryside, which no longer function as the centre of working farms, as a tourism in countryside but not necessarily in farm,. Though abroad agri-tourism is a broadly accepted way of enhancing the chance to stay on a working farm, it is necessary to distinguish the real extent to which this phenomenon is really occurring.

In 2000, with the Europe landscape convention, the international community was invited to achieve sustainable development based on a balanced and harmonious relationship between social needs, economic activity and the environment (Council of Europe, 2000).

To introduce tourism in the working farm, landscape has an important role to play. It constitutes a fundamental resource that can contribute to attract visitors. The rural environment is, however, a very fragile one. It is easily either changed and/or damaged by rapid changes caused by tourism (Lane, 2005). Current question are: "What does farm need to do to become an agri-tourism attraction?" "Which form of rural tourism is suitable for the environment and the landscape?". In order to implement activities able to enhance the agricultural sector, the means chosen to open farms to tourism, as well as how agri-tourism is perceived, defined and presented, must be taken into consideration.

It is necessary to follow specific criteria, in order to satisfy local conditions (Sem, 1989). Methodologies and tools of governance for this will be examined in this paper.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to understand how farmers can answer these questions, the research started with the analysis of the effects of legislation. The Italian laws leave a lot of matters unsolved, such as the susceptibility of the farm, the limits and conditions of rehabilitation of farm buildings and sustainability of interventions for the land and farm.

2.1. The Analysis

Through the analysis on a sample piece of land of Northern Italy, the study followed the phases showed in Fig. 1. In the sample area, the different resources were analysed which

could be influenced by a new agri-tourism activity. In a very few cases, farm land may fall within a conservation area which is designated for its historic interest.

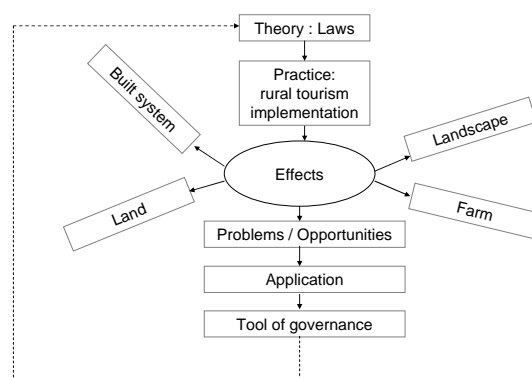


Figure 1. Methodological path

For all cases, the means to implement the new activity can change and the farm needs to be guided through all the reference laws, national as well as local.

Sustainability of implementing new agri-tourism activities was examined under two main points of view:

1. *local language of farm buildings*, in order to avoid the environmental impact of some important new buildings in rural areas or of the introduction of some additional referral arrangements for farming and forestry buildings (Agostini, 2006a). The purpose of the referral phase was to allow the environmental impact to be considered and to ask for any changes in the site and design.
2. *environmental and landscape designation*, in order to know whether there are any special features affecting the proposed site for the new agri-tourism and the implications for its application.

In order to evaluate the sustainability of the effects, different indicators were studied and applied in a critical area still rich in terms of its agrarian identity. The analysis of local heritage taking into account buildings and landscape structures permitted to define the parameters to compare them to those linked to the implementation of agri-tourism and to the activity of the farm. In order to gather and store the data, a designated database was developed. Supplemental to that, a web page was created to manage the data in order to produce an easy tool for self-evaluation for farmers and stake-holders.

2.2. Theory and Practice

In Europe, programs and community initiatives exist in order to support tourism in the rural areas. The first financial incentive of tourism in rural areas was set in place by the CEE 80/2615 norm. Subsequently CEE norm 797/85, with reference to the structural support to

the farms, established grants of "a tourist character" or handicrafts to carry out in the farms, especially in the poorer areas as defined by the 268/75 norm.

In order to diversify the agricultural activity, the following norms 2328/91, 950/97 extended the incentives to all the territory of the European Union.

For the planning period 2000 - 2006, norm 1257/99 allowed the member states to destine community financial resources to the European Union for rural tourism, in order to promote the diversification of farm activity towards tourism and handicrafts.

In the same years, CEE norms 2052/88, 4253/88, 1260/99 supported measures for rural tourism. The European approach, to enhance the local traditions, left each country free to develop its own form of rural tourism in relationship to dispositions of its internal laws and resources. The spread of this phenomenon previously indicated shows the answer of the member states to the European Union (Keane and Quinn, 1990).

The European Union usually defines rural tourism as combining various forms of hospitality. Consequently, this activity has different effects on the farm.

Staying on a farm often includes the opportunity to appraise local agricultural products and specialities of the gastronomic tradition and many "farm accommodations" are available throughout Europe. Also, there are different uses of the territory, as for example touring, cycling tourism, wine-gastronomic itineraries, sporting and recreational activities, farmhouses, B & B, Eco-Farm Holidays, Guest ranches, Hay hotels, Farm Holidays - Bio & Health, Wine Farm Holidays. These are only some of the many ways to open farms to tourism and often the differences between ecological and conventional farming are not so big. In all Europe, the agri-tourism trend is on the rise and the response of the people encourages it: in 2003 3.3 million of Germans spent time on the farm.

The European Union wants this sector to grow further. As regard agriculture and rural development, the structural funds have maintained economic activities in the countryside (E.U., 2004). In order to encourage the economic diversification of rural areas through agri-tourism and environmental protection activities, it is proposed to spend €13 billion a year on it, starting in 2007 (Gumbel, 2004).

The big diversification in the offers shows also the lack of a reference European legislation for rural tourism, as there is no definition of it, in a homogeneous way. In Italy, the first attempt to set some rules and definitions on rural tourism is dated back to 1973.

The law of the province of Trento, an autonomous province, was the first to establish that the list of tourist operators should include the manager of the farm that practised or intended to practise "farm holidays" singularly or in association with others.

The first national law which takes this into consideration is the law on tourism, dated 17 May 1983 n. 217. Here, tourism in the farm is taken into consideration for the first time as a simple way of lodging. In fact, the law includes among the receptive structures, the lodgings called "agri-tourism", defining this as rooms located in farm buildings in which the farmers can host tourists. The next law n. 730 dated 5 December 1985 is an organic reference on the agri-tourism activity. This law establishes the fundamental principle of connection between farm activities and tourism activities, defining how the activity and hospitality from the farmers should be dealt with (Ceccacci, 2005).

It has to be developed using a ratio of connection, complementary to the agricultural production without becoming the main activity of the farm. The detailed definition of each

form of implementation was left to each regional legislation entity. The last Italian national law, dated 20 February 2006, n. 96, underlines the need to sustain agriculture through the promotion of “suitable forms of tourism” in the countryside, in harmony with the rural development programmes of the European Union, of the state, and of the regions. These must :

- protect, qualify and enhance the specific resources of each territory;
- encourage the maintenance of the human activities in the rural areas;
- promote the diversification of the farm;
- allow initiatives to defend the land and environment on behalf of the farmers through an increase in business incomes and improvement in the quality of life;
- restore the farm building heritage, safeguarding its landscape;
- support and stimulate the typical products and its quality, linking them to the local traditions;
- help in learning rural and food education;
- favour development of agriculture and forestry.

The main question is what “suitable tourism” means. This concept is ambiguous and its implementation involves numerous elements and stake-holders, with diverse aims and beliefs (Lane, 1991). The answer was sought by analysing the effects of existing form of tourism in working farm.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The Diversification of the Offer

Concerning diversification of the farm, the farms selected by the national circuit (Italian Touring Club) for the quality of agri-tourism offers, reveals a progressive adjustment of agriculture to the additional activities rather than the contrary.

On the peninsula, for what concerns the principal services, about 80% of the farms offer lodging, a few more than 60% of catering, about 20% horse riding services and 10% on the farm camping.

The guests can be accommodated in flats, rooms or camping sites (Istat, 2000; Inea, 2002). They can stay overnight in tents or in campers.

Out of 1291 farms selected, a large part of them has only rooms (398 farms), flats (376) or a combination of the two typologies (308); agri-camping is instead marginal and is always a first and second choice in terms of overnight stay in rooms (112), in apartments (28) or both (69). Generally, the offer is linked to the presence of an interesting site: Tuscany with Trentino Alto Adige covers 42% of the full market. 9% of agri-tourism activities are located in Umbria, thanks to its intact landscapes and traditions of handicraft and gastronomy. In Piemonte, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Marche, Lazio e Abruzzo, agri-tourism is about 5% of

the Italian total. In all other regions, the number of selected farms engaged in tourism is less than 50.

3.2. No Sense of Place

In Lombardy, the farms offers are increasing (Irer, 2001). Looking at the agri-tourism located in the sample area, in the province of Varese, out of 63 agri-tourisms 60 are dedicated to restaurant services (Agostini et al., 2006b) (Fig.2).

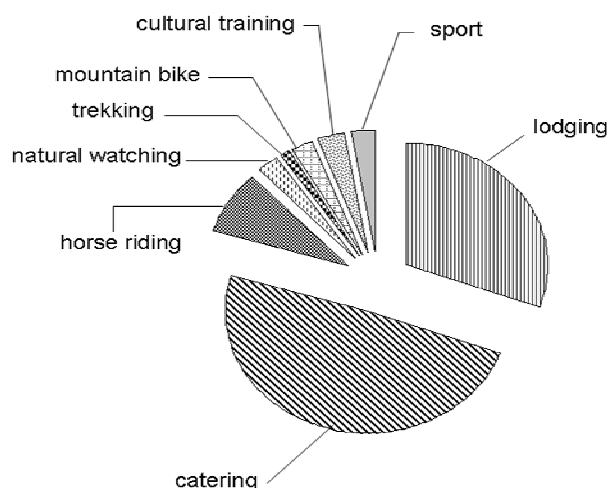


Figure 2. Local offers of agri-tourism

Though in this site the richness of rural landscape should be a precious resource for farms, only few farm house resorts show relationships with the local environment. The problem stands out immediately if we look at how the farms promote their business, where their agricultural aspects remain marginal compared to other services. Often the “suggestions of the chef” are the most evident signs on the web page. The lack of identity goes from the farm buildings asset to the logo of the farm, like that which becoming “ranch”, for its logo and virtual image might be better located in any American site rather than in Northern Italy.

This is just one out of many examples, where the intention is to showcase the area, but instead is almost a window opening into other lands, where the site and the Italian farm are no longer recognisable. In this case, the identity is overcome by the virtual image desired by the tourist. These examples show very well how the farm, which should have in agri-tourism a support for its real activity, becomes instead a subsidiary, altering with its own real image, that of the territory and of the context in which it is inserted.

3.3. Governance Identity

Looking at the existing farms within the study, it is essential to guide the stakeholders towards a sustainable management of the agri-tourism as a mean of real territorial and landscape exploitation for purposes of profit (Agostini, 1998).

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To find the possible solution, the research was concentrated on a mountain area with an agrarian/rural landscape of great interest. In order to evaluate the suitability of agri-tourism activity the local analysis was concentrated on the typical characteristics of the site, with special regard to the productive, architectural, historical and landscape aspects (Adinarayana et alii, 2006, Agostini, 1999, 2006a). Varying importance was attributed to each defined element, in order to understand its role in the success of the new agri-tourism concept. All collected data were then organised in a web site, in order to manage the results of combining application of new agri-tourism activities with the local features recognised.



Figure 3. Four steps on the path of the web page

The web page was built as an easy tool to guide farmers to answer three principal questions:

- Is the farm located in a landscape context which can ensure successful agri-tourism?
- What are the limits of the changes and interventions imposed by the current laws and planning schemes for the site and farm?
- Does the farm represent a local heritage, before and after the intervention?.

Guiding farmer within the guided path (as illustrated by fig. 3), in order to understand the landscape characterisations, the historic values of the farmstead and the need of alteration of the landscape, the system gives the final evaluation, explaining what is the best thing to do or to avoid to get the best results (Agostini, 2006c). The suggested actions are a checklist and should not necessarily follow the sequence in which they are showed in the web page.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To encourage planning authorities and other organisations to adopt a more positive and active approach to providing development opportunities, work possibilities of agri-tourism should result from the interaction of this new farm activity with farm owners, regional organisations and local councils, aimed at:

- implementing a sustainable reuse of historical farm buildings, in order to improve the rural landscape;
- studying new alternatives to the function of agri-tourism as residential tourism;
- supporting the main agricultural activities in the area under observation, in order to create work opportunities and increase the appeal of agriculture to young people;
- providing training to private and consultancy offices (Agostini 2006,b).

The results are a guidance for achieving sustainable reuse of old farm buildings, in a manner that is able to revitalise the agricultural landscape and/or promote novel alternatives to the tourism-residential function envisaged by the redevelopment policies currently in force.

The criteria introduced can also provide support for the predominant forms of agriculture in the area, contributing to creating employment, and increasing the appeal of agriculture to younger generations. Although diversification will not be possible for every farmer, well planned and reasoned projects can create new sources of income for farmers, and can enhance the range of facilities available in rural areas. Land and buildings are assets that can be used to supplement the income from farming. Planning policies for rural areas should enable farmers to develop and thrive without damaging the environment.

The research showed that the lack of knowledge concerning territorial identity was the greatest problem, as well as the lack of awareness of the farmers of the effects of some management choices to start up a tourism business on the farm. The forms chosen to open farms to tourism, as well as how agri-tourism is perceived, defined and presented, by placing it within a local context, must follow specific criteria in order to satisfy local conditions.

The tool that was developed makes it possible to understand which activities can be connected with mainstream farming and forestry by examining carefully planned prescriptions. Meanwhile it allows to evaluate the suitability of future agri-tourism activities to the aims of a sustainable tourism in rural areas as in Lane (2005), in order to:

- support the rural economy
- sustain landscape and habitats
- develop sufficient understanding, leadership and vision amongst the decision-makers in rural areas.

The development of the proposed strategy-making process can encourage an ongoing partnership between business, government and cultural and conservation interests. Its use is easy requiring just few minutes to follow the guided path. Its effect is to manage the change of rural heritage. It means the health of the landscape and the guaranty of successful investments for farmers, developing opportunities to increase off-farm income.

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