

**Characteristics, Challenges, and Opportunities in Montana's Agritourism Industry**

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## Introduction/Framework

Improving tourism has proven to build rural economic resiliency, community motivation, and positive visitor perceptions (Akin, Shaw, & Spartz, 2015). Tourism can be developed around existing community assets, including “natural resources, outdoor sports, and recreation, agriculture, and unique cultural features to increase economic benefits” (Akin et al., 2015, p. 1; Hugo & Lacher, 2014; Norby & Retallick, 2012). Tourism in rural areas has transformed over the years into the idealized small town appeal of today (Gartner, 2004). Many people, specifically those who live in more urban areas, romanticize the idea of a rural lifestyle (Harrington, 2017). Agriculturalists are increasingly choosing to capitalize on this idea through the incorporation of agritourism into their businesses (Harrington, 2017). The National Agricultural Law Center (2018) defines agritourism as “a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism...to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining and/or educating the visitors and generating income for business owner” (p. 1). Chase et al (2018) developed a conceptual framework for agritourism that incorporates two tiers of activities, core (on-farm) and peripheral (off-farm), and five activity sectors, including direct sales, education, hospitality, outdoor recreation, and entertainment. Within this framework, education is considered a core tier activity that “takes place on a working farm or ranch and has deep connections to agricultural production and/or the marketing of a farm’s products” (p. 17). Agritourism operations with educational activities that aim to educate and engage the public in agricultural experiences were the focus for this study.

The agricultural way of life provides diverse opportunities for landowners to generate income outside of farming or ranching (Matthews, 2012; Mitchell & Turner, 2010). Agritourism refers to the combination of agriculture and tourism to connect farms and communities. Agritourism, as an informal on-farm activity, offers community education in agricultural production and can lead to more informed public decision-making (LaFollette et. al., 2014). This approach allows producers to connect directly with consumers to add depth and variety to their products, services, and income. These on-farm activities could include farm stays, farmers markets, hay mazes, pick-your-own orchards and vegetable gardens, school visits, hosted dinners, and community supported agriculture programs. Research has confirmed that agritourism can add supplemental income to a farm, (Sullins, Moxon, & McFadden, 2010; Van Sandt, Low, & Thilmany, 2018), provide opportunities for smaller farms to stay competitive through diversification (Matthews, 2012), and provide employment options for locals or family members on the farm (Van Sandt & Thilmany, 2016). Agritourism and recreational services in the West have increased 20.7% from 2007-2012 (Chase et al, 2018). Montana is a particularly viable location for agritourism because it exemplifies the three main factors that positively affect farmers’ participation- “public access to the farm for recreation, farms near central cities, and farms in Rocky Mountain regions” (Baji & Reeder, 2012, p. 189). While agritourism is a growing industry nationwide (Carpio, Wohlgenant, & Boonsaeng), little research exists specific to Montana with its two largest industries in agriculture and tourism (MDA, 2019). This study addresses the AAAE National Research Agenda Priority Area 6: Vibrant, Resilient Communities, Question Two: “How do agricultural leadership, education, and communication teaching, research, and extension programs impact local communities?” as agritourism can be an effective means of educating the public, advancing community development, and improving the economic stability of businesses.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Montana agritourism stakeholders' perceptions of industry characteristics, challenges, and opportunities. The objectives were to: (1) Identify the challenges faced by agritourism operators, (2) Identify common questions of agritourism operators, and (3) Describe characteristics of a successful agritourism enterprise. There are currently 19 defined agritourism operations in the state (AERO, 2018). The sample consisted of seven stakeholders- four current agritourism operators and three extension agents located in active agritourism counties. An interview guide was developed by researchers to explore agritourism concerns, activities, motivations, demand, challenges, questions, and support. A team of three researchers conducted semi-structured interviews via WebEx once a week over a three month period. Interviews were transcribed using Descript and content analysis was performed as each researcher independently analyzed data based on research objectives (Creswell, 2014). The researchers met during the process to synthesize information, determine final themes, and ensure data saturation was reached (Creswell, 2014).

## **Results**

Seven themes revealed challenges faced when starting or operating an agritourism enterprise: liability, public interaction, regulations/legislation, monetary investment, time constraints, labor shortage, and a lack of business management skills. Common questions focused on business advice, liability, legislative obstacles and regulations, and effective marketing strategies. Seven themes emerged as characteristics of a successful agritourism enterprise as mentioned by the percentage of participants: creating a memorable visitor experience (71%); a good marketing scheme (71%); passion for the business (57%); location with demand (43%); a solid business plan (43%); understanding operation skills and limitations (43%); and business diversity (29%).

## **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications**

This research suggest specific improvements to assist the growing agritourism industry in Montana. The most common themes in all responses related to the need for accessible liability information, public interaction regulations, and assistance with business management. State regulations were a top concern for enterprises to manage risk when interacting with the public. Montana laws are currently unclear or non-existent in this area; regulations must be enacted to inform and protect agritourism operations. Insurance agencies need programs that allow for diversification and risk management of farm businesses interested in agritourism. The top rated characteristics of an effective operation were creating a unique experience for visitors and having an effective marketing plan. To be successful, the operator must create a memorable experience to connect consumers with agriculture through various informal educational activities as described by Chase et al (2018). A sense of community was dominant theme throughout the data. Agritourism businesses must encourage community interactions to provide the public with a unique experience of where their food comes from to help advance the entire agricultural industry (Akin, Shaw, & Spartz, 2015). A well-planned marketing strategy, including road signs, word of mouth, social media, and advertisements, appears vital to reaching consumers. Operators are seeking guidance from experts and authorities to improve their own enterprises. As such, mentoring and networking programs should be developed to connect agritourism businesses with economic development organizations, extension education, and agricultural and tourism associations, as well as a designated state coordinator. As this industry grows, post-secondary agricultural education should consider adding courses and majors in agritourism.

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