

Farm Tourism: A Preliminary Study of Participants' Expectations and Perceptions of Farm Tours

L. Coomber^a and C. Lim^b

^a *School of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University (l.coomber@scu.edu.au)*

^b *Christine Lim Department of Tourism, Leisure, Hotel and Sport Management, Griffith University (christine.lim@griffith.edu.au)*

Abstract: Tourism is a major redistributor of resources within the domestic sector with substantial multiplier effects. The majority of tourism businesses in Australia are small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As tourism is a labour-intensive industry, the promotion of tourism SMEs blends well with models of community and regional development, as small firms provide the underpinning for local entrepreneurship and job generation. Farm tourism encompasses a set of economic activities with a tremendous potential for future domestic earnings and regional development, drawing on services provided by local governments and regional communities. The paper analyses whether there are significant differences between the expectations and perceptions of participants of a guided tour in an organic farm. The results of the research may be useful in developing an interpretive and tour management model which will help to sustain rural communities in farm environments through tourism, and engage the support of local and regional government.

Keywords: Farm tourism; servicescape; expectations; perceptions; interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Pigram and Jenkins [1994] argue that the fluctuating and politically sensitive nature of the rural sector and the contribution of tourism to Gross Domestic Product, employment and incomes have given rural tourism an opportunity to gain greater prominence. With the increasing susceptibility of farm produce to global prices, regional restructuring has brought changes to traditional farming activities and lifestyles. The decline in traditional farming activities and the resulting loss of agricultural income in Australia, is a serious problem facing, and in sustaining, rural communities. But tourism has created a renewed awareness of, and demand for, rural values and environments.

Government agencies have increased their interest in farm tourism as a strategy for creating regional jobs, selling local products, supporting small-scale business and retaining farming lifestyles. The Regional Tourism Programme is a Federal Government commitment to regional tourism [Australian Government: Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, 2003, Online]. In 1999-2000, about 2 percent of Australia's farms were

undertaking some activity other than agricultural production [ABS, 2003].

Tourism is a major redistributor of resources within the domestic sector with substantial multiplier effects. The majority of tourism businesses in Australia are small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As tourism is a labour-intensive industry, the promotion of tourism SMEs blends well with models of community and regional development, as small firms provide the underpinning for local entrepreneurship and job generation. Farm tourism encompasses a set of economic activities with a tremendous potential for future domestic earnings and regional development, drawing on services provided by local governments and regional communities. Thus, tourism in regional Australia is playing an important role in regeneration and diversification.

The paper analyses different aspects of visitors' satisfaction, and whether there are significant differences between the expectations and perceptions of participants of a guided tour in an organic farm. Kiwi Down Under, a small farm-tourism enterprise, is located sixteen kilometres from the city of Coffs Harbour in New South

Wales. The owner conducts traditional style walking tours for visitors. Refreshments, food and organic produce are available for sale at the tea-house. Guided tours on farms which provide education about the farm environment, and interaction with the host, are the important aspects of the farm experience. The results of the research may be useful in developing an interpretive and tour management model which will help to sustain rural communities in farm environments through tourism, and engage the support of local and regional government.

FARM TOURISM

Rural and farm tourism, as a category of alternative tourism, is a growing sector of tourism. The growing number of tourists venturing into rural regions, and the limited and spasmodic research in the farm tourism sector, suggests that empirical research in this area is needed. There has been limited research in farm tourism because the latter lacks a comprehensive body of knowledge and theoretical framework, which is largely due to problems with definition [Oppermann, 1995].

Farm tourism is a sub-sector of rural tourism. According to Roberts and Hall [2001], farm tourism is one of the five categories of rural tourism, the others being ecotourism, cultural, adventure and activity tourism. The broader sector of rural tourism can be defined as tourism activity in rural areas and has different meanings in different countries. The European community uses rural tourism to refer to all tourism activity in rural areas, but ignores large-scale mass recreation complexes in otherwise rural areas.

Hill et al [1996] define rural tourism as 'the natural life tourism, through which the customer may access the natural environment as opposed to commercially developed tourist activities and locations' (p. 50). Rural tourism has been initiated to satisfy tourists who are seeking healthy, active, relaxing and culturally valid experiences to escape urban crowds and stressful workplaces.

The term 'farm tourism' is used in some regions or countries with agrotourism or agritourism. Whatever the label, most often it refers to 'rural tourism conducted on working farms where the working environment forms part of the product from the perspective of the consumer' [Roberts and Hall, 2001].

Farm tourism can include:

- ◆ Accommodation
- ◆ Farm visitor centres, galleries and museums
- ◆ Farm shops for produce and crafts
- ◆ Guided walks and farm trails
- ◆ Educational visits
- ◆ Farm activities, such as mustering, fruit picking, horse riding and fishing
- ◆ Food and beverage outlets

A common feature relevant to all of the above is management by the owner/farmer with help from the family household. Tourism is usually secondary to the farm activities.

Considerable attention has been given to food tourism and wine tourism in recent years. When visits to farms, and farm tours are part of the experience, these forms of tourism are best categorised as sub-sectors of farm tourism. The tangible and intangible elements of the farm landscape attract visitors and influence their level of satisfaction. Hall et al [2003] use the terms 'winescape' and 'foodscape'. Similarly, 'servicescape' can justifiably be used to examine farm tourism.

SERVICESCAPE, EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

The supply of farm tourism is about the countryside as a site of consumption. Hall et al [2003] argue that there appears to be an increasing need for some consumers to reconnect with the countryside as a source of recreation and relaxation, offering peace, solitude, fresh air and wide open spaces.

The servicescape becomes relevant in the delivery of the product. In this study, service delivery is largely facilitated by the guide's interpretation. Features of the servicescape include noise, odour, temperature, layout, signage, access, convenience and so on. These ambient conditions affect the five senses and make the participant feel comfortable or uncomfortable. They serve as cues impacting on behaviour and emotional response, influencing the level of satisfaction with the tour.

Expectations and perceptions, together with motivation, are the factors often used to measure satisfaction and hence tour quality. Lovelock et al [1998] define expectations as 'pre-purchase beliefs about service provision that act as a standard or reference point for judging post-purchase performance' (p.121).

Perceptions are defined by Greenberg and Baron [1997] as the process through which people select, organise and interpret information gathered by the senses in order to understand the world.

The provider and user are in close proximity implying that satisfaction is influenced by consumers' perceptions of service and the attention they receive. Satisfaction is dependent on performance. Lovelock et al [1998] define satisfaction as meeting expected needs and desires and is the consumer's post-purchase evaluation.

Interpretation uses themes, perspectives and linkages. It develops an appreciation of sense of place. It creates for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people and objects with which the site is associated. Many urban people lack understanding of rural life and there is a growing recognition of the need for education.

DISCUSSION

The participants from the education segment of the market responded to a pre-tour and post-tour survey that examined attitudes to twelve elements of the farm servicescape. These elements are related to behavioural and physical dimensions. In this pilot study, a small purposive convenience sample of thirty-six tertiary students is used.

A conventional approach to measuring satisfaction using before-and-after tour questionnaires is reasonably easy to administer and it is cost effective. Post-tour questionnaires are most important in reflecting on the experience, while a pre-tour questionnaire is acceptable as the respondents would have enough knowledge or access to information (for example, advertising) to answer the questions accurately. It is recognised that this instrument could restrict respondents from expressing their feelings adequately, especially in the complex dimensions of servicescape and inter-relationships. Hence, follow-up research using observation and interview techniques would be useful.

Twelve close-ended questions on a five-point Likert-type scale are used to measure respondent attitude to a range of elements in the servicescape. Given that most criticism of SERVQUAL lies in its generic nature [Yoon and Ekinici, 2003], this study has chosen dimensions and elements relevant to the farm landscape environment to measure customer satisfaction. The elements of the servicescape used are embedded in the tour

activity. Three additional questions in the survey also provided information about the respondents, namely:

- 67% has not previously participated in a farm tour
- 53% do not have any connection with tourism in their work or career goals
- 75% are under the age of 25

Table 1 provides the mean scores of the pre- and post-tour responses to various activities on the farm, and the estimated t-statistic to test whether they are statistically significant at the 5% level (the critical value for the two-tailed test of paired differences is 2.03). Differences between expectations and perceptions which impact on satisfaction and quality, have implications for management and marketing of farm tourism. All pre-tour means are statistically different from post-tour means, which reject the null hypotheses that there are no differences between participants' expectations and perceptions of farm activities at the 5% level of significance.

Participants expected more walking in the farm than they actually engaged in. While they found it easy to move around on the uneven and sloping terrain, it was not what they had expected. Another important element of guided tours is related to time spent standing at the one site, often listening to commentary. Contrary to the participants' expectation, they were not standing around at any one site for too long.

Individuals respond to farm noises and smells differently. Responses in relation to these questions are very subjective. Nonetheless, participants have found the farm noise and smell to be more pleasant than expected. The guide could have modified their behaviour when he perceived fear, anxiety or discomfort, to generate a positive response.

Respondents felt comfortable with the farm environment then expected. This may appear a little surprising since 67% of the respondents have indicated that they have not previously participated in a farm tour. Comfort relates to a number of other elements and may help explain this response.

It would seem that the guide has provided clear and meaningful commentary, and has engendered a positive mood in the participants, as there is a significant difference between expected and perceived responses in relation to understanding farm activities. Most farm tours are conducted in winter because kiwi fruit growing, which is the main activity and attraction, is in a dormant state.

In making other farm features the focus of the tour, it is imperative that the guide presents the information effectively.

It seems that the guide has made the farm experience an enjoyable one even though the participants interacted less extensively with him than expected.

Finally, the respondents did not expect and did not find the availability of food and drink for sale to be important. Sales from the food and organic produce outlet of the enterprise could supplement the small business income. Given that the tour was conducted on a pleasant 'sunny' winter day and/or the participants were students, their responses to this aspect of the farm tour were not surprising.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the participants have found the farm experience to be enjoyable and have felt comfortable with the farm environment. The study also shows that the guide has provided the tourists a good understanding of farm activities through effective interpretative tours. Owners of small farm tourism businesses are often not aware of performance strategies to encourage interaction and involvement of participants. Evaluation is important in aiding adaptation of techniques to different groups within the same market segment.

This research has been conducted in a 'real' farm setting as opposed to a theme park or agrodome, and is particularly applicable to smaller tour groups seeking a less formal and staged experience. It is necessary to identify how customers define the standards and parameters for their evaluation. Farmers are hosts, but they are also interpreters and guides to a different way of life [Pearce, 1988]. Satisfying customers expectations will go some way towards re-imagining, or creating a positive image of rural landscapes. It will also facilitate an understanding of farming people who have contributed greatly to regional economies in Australia through their activity and lifestyle.

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book*. Australia, 2003.
- Australian Government: department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, *Regional Tourism Program*, 2003. Available: www.industry.gov.au [Accessed January 23, 2004].
- Greenberg, J., and R. Baron, Behaviour in Organisations, In Fluker, M and Turner, L. (2000). Needs, Motivations, and Expectations of a Commercial Whitewater Rafting Experience, *Journal of Travel Research*, 38, May, 380-389, 1997.
- Hall, C.M., L. Sharples, R. Mitchell, N. Macionis, and B. Cambourne, *Food Tourism Around the World*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, 2003.
- Hill, D., E. Sunderland, C. O'Cathain, and G. Daly, *Rural Tourism Development in Ireland*. In *Tourism and Hospitality Research: Australia and International Perspectives. Proceedings of Australian Tourism and Hospitality Research Conference, Coffs Harbour*. BTR, Canberra, 1996.
- Lovelock, C., P. Patterson, and R. Walker, *Services Marketing*, Prentice Hall Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1998.
- Oppermann, M., Holidays on the farm: a case study of German hosts and guests, *Journal of Travel Research*, 34(1), 63-72, 1995.
- Pearce, P.L., *The Ulysses Factor: Evaluating Visitors in Tourist Settings*, Springer-Verlag, USA, 1988.
- Pigram, J., and J. Jenkins, Rural recreation and tourism policy and planning, In Mercer, D (ed). *New Viewpoints in Australian outdoor Education Research and Planning*, Hopper Marriott and Associates, Melbourne, 1994.
- Roberts, L., and D. Hall, *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*, CABI Publishing, Wallingford, UK, 2001.
- Yoon, T., and Y. Ekinici, An examination of the AERVQUAL dimensions using the Guttman Scaling Procedure, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 27(1), February, 3-23, 2003.

Table 1: Means for questionnaires and t-statistic showing significance of differences between the mean.

Item No.	Pre-tour means	Post-tour means	Estimated t-statistic	5-point Likert Scale
1. Ease of finding the tour guide on arrival	2.19	1.61	6.45	1 = extremely easy 5 = very difficult
2. Interaction with the guide	2.28	2.44	6.33	1 = extensively 5 = not at all
3. Understanding farm activities	2.39	1.89	7.66	1 = extremely well 5 = not at all
4. Expected amount of walking	2.39	3.14	8.38	1 = extensive amount 5 = very small amount
5. Ease of moving around the farm	2.44	2.06	4.79	1 = extremely easy 5 = very difficult
6. Time spent standing at the one site	2.83	2.94	3.67	1 = far too much 5 = far too little
7 Attitude to farm noises	2.03	1.75	4.38	1 = very pleasant 5 = very unpleasant
8. Attitude to farm smells	2.97	2.14	7.25	1 = very pleasant 5 = very unpleasant
9. Comfort with the farm environment	1.92	1.64	3.89	1 = very comfortable 5 = very uncomfortable
10. Exploring features of personal interest	2.53	2.39	5.30	1 = extensively 5 = not at all
11. Importance of access to food/drink	2.97	2.94	5.38	1 = extremely important 5 = not important
12. Overall enjoyment of farm experience	2.44	2.0	5.11	1 = extremely enjoyable 5 = not at all