

Status and Prospects of Agri-tourism in the Province of La Union, Philippines

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Abstract - This study deals on agri-tourism farms in the province of La Union, branded as the “Heart of Agri-tourism in Northern Luzon”. This study identified the socio-economic profile of the farm owners, business profile, current status, levels of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the farms for the requisites of the IRR in agri-tourism farm accreditation and its relationships with socio-economic factors. The descriptive research design was used. Farm owners/managers of 16 identified agri-tourism farms were the respondents of the study. Findings revealed that most of the farms were sole proprietorship and were owned dominantly by male who are college graduates and are married. Majority of the farms are accredited by DOT and ATI. There is an increasing trend of visitorship in the last three years while major problems encountered were unfavorable environmental factors and inaccessibility to clients. Age, sex and educational attainment were not significantly related with levels of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the farms for the requisites in accreditation. Considering the salient findings, a recommended strategic plan for agri-tourism was prepared for the enhancement of the provincial strategic tourism development plan. Salient findings of the study imply the need for the following: intensive trainings to enhance agri-tourism farm management skills; massive dissemination and promotion of the IRR for agri-tourism farm accreditation; provision of avenues for financial and marketing assistance; and product diversification to boost revenues during low season. The results of the study are deemed contributory to the current limited research data on agri-tourism in the Philippines.

Keywords –accreditation, agri-tourism, correlation, strategic plan

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the key drivers for socio-economic progress. It brings more foreign and domestic earnings through the interaction between the large number of international visitors and residents.

In many countries like the Philippines, tourism is regarded as an alternative commodity to help in economic growth and it has experienced continued growth and diversification. Interestingly, the country has seen an improvement in its travel and tourism competitiveness ranking in the report prepared by the World Economic Forum, rising from 82nd to 74th place in 2013 [1].

The growing demand of tourists for new attractions and more exciting adventure spurred the development of a tourism diversification like agri-tourism. Agri-tourism or agro-tourism, as it is defined most broadly, involves any activity that brings visitors to a farm or ranch. Other terms associated with agri-tourism are “agritainment,” “value-added products,” “farm direct marketing,” and “sustainable agriculture” [2],

Farm tourism has several benefits to the country’s economy. farm tourism sites have boosted Philippines’ tourism potential as the country is now a top agri-tourism destination with foreign visitor arrivals growing by 10.24%. As of January to May 2018, foreign visitor arrivals have a total of 3.177 million, a 10.24% growth from the same period in 2017 [3].

The economic contribution of agri-tourism in the Philippines cannot be over-emphasized. It is a sustainable tourism in the countryside as it marries the concept of enjoyment with resource management, community empowerment, cooperation, fair trade and diversification [3]. The influx of tourists in the countryside can create revenue, generate employment in the rural areas where jobs are most needed and prevent the excessive migration of people to major urban centers. Thus, a large number of farm-owners have taken advantage of this business opportunity and transformed their farms into farm tourism/agri-tourism sites which attract travelers and boost even more the country’s tourism and agriculture industries.

To intensify the development of agri-tourism, the Farm Tourism Act of 2014 was enacted as a comprehensive program for the development and promotion of farm tourism in the country [4]. Then, Senate Bill No. 3002, also known as the Farm Tourism Development Act was created; and consequently, enacted in 2016 as R.A. No. 10816, “An Act Providing for the Development and Promotion of Farm Tourism in the Philippines and for Other Purposes.” In 2016, it was included in the Philippine Development Plan for 2017-2022. Specifically, it was cited as one of the 10-point Socio-economic Agenda of the country, i.e. “Promote rural and value chain development toward increasing agricultural and rural enterprise productivity and rural tourism” [5].

Aligned to this program of the government, the province of La Union makes a bold vision for the province to become the “Heart of Agri-tourism” in Northern Luzon, Philippines by 2025. Libongco of the HSAMI cited La Union together with Davao and Laguna as among the places with growing farm tourism, where the number of visitors swelled by about 157 % to 18,000 in 2017 from 7,000 in 2016 [6].

Specifically, SEARCA cited that the farm sites in La Union have an average income of Php 25,000 to Php 60,000 per month. According to a statement of Gov. Francisco Emmanuel Ortega III in the Global Farm Tourism Summit hosted by Business World and SEARCA in April 2019, the province has seen a 25 % growth in tourist arrivals in 2018 as it is known to be a surfing capital [3].

To further develop agri-tourism in the province, the La Union Investment Program has a Php 25.2 billion budget from 2018 to 2022, which extends help to small and medium enterprises through providing equipment and machinery, post-harvest facilities and organic farming and construction of roads and other infrastructures. The main thrust of the province’s strategy is to focus on destination development through tourism circuits centered on community-based agritourism sites – in contrast to the conventional site development approach. The principle behind tourism circuits is to systematically connect all the different tourism and tourism-related attractions and services in a particular area with a major tourist site acting as a centerpiece for the circuit [7].

Given the current status of agri-tourism in the province, this study was conducted to determine its status and prospects of agri-tourism. The results of

this study are deemed to serve as a resource material which can help in tracing the support system needed to intensify the development of agri-tourism. Significant findings can also be used by related government agencies in formulating policies and courses of actions leading to the further development of the agri-tourism industry in the province and in the country as well.

For the agri-tourism farm entrepreneurs, this study could also serve as an objective assessment of their enterprises. The results of this study could also guide and motivate other existing entrepreneurs who desire to put up or transform their production

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research was conducted to assess the status and prospects of the Agri-tourism farms in La Union. Specifically, it aimed to identify the socio-economic profile of the farm owners, business profile, current status, levels of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the farms for the requisites of the IRR in agri-tourism farm accreditation and its relationships with socio-economic factors.

METHODS

Research Design

The descriptive method of research was used in the study. Major indicators in this research were framed on the existing Implementing Rules and Regulations on the Accreditation of Agri-tourism Sites (Executive Order No. 292), promulgated by the Department of Tourism as well as the strategic development plan of the province of La Union.

The descriptive method of research was used in the study. As opposed to an experimental or normative method, the descriptive method develops knowledge by describing observed situations, events and objects.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents

Agri-tourism Circuit	Municipality	No. of Respondents
Central	City of San Fernando	2
	San Juan	1
	Bacnotan	1
Central Eastern	Bauang	5
North	Balaoan	2
South	Aringay	1
South Eastern	Sto. Tomas	1
	Pugo	1
	Rosario	2
Total		16

The primary and secondary kinds of data were used in the study. The primary data deals with the information gathered directly from the entrepreneur-respondents (Table 1) and the researcher's on-site observations.

The study covered all identified agri-tourism farm sites listed by the Provincial Information and Tourism Office under its five agri-tourism circuits (Fig.1).

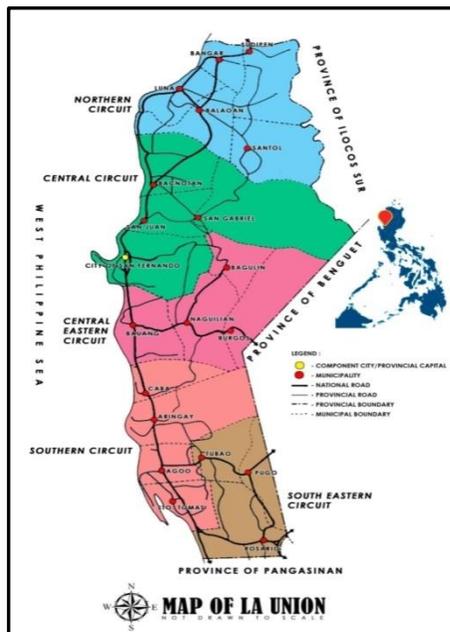


Fig.1. Locale of the Study

On the other hand, the secondary data were gathered from documents such as government records, existing legislation and other researches and articles regarding agri-tourism in agriculture magazines or journals and newspapers.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

An interview schedule was used as an instrument in drawing data from the entrepreneur-respondents. Questions relevant to the levels of awareness, readiness and acceptability as well as level of satisfaction were based on the Implementing Rules and Regulations in the Accreditation of Agri-tourism Enterprises, as stipulated in E.O. No. 292. Since the framework of the instrument used was based on a government legislation, it was no longer subjected to a validation test.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed statistically using tools like frequency, percentage, mean and weighted mean.

Correlation analysis using Pearson R Square in the SPSS Program was also employed to identify the relationship of socio-economic factors such as age, sex and educational attainment with the level of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the agri-tourism enterprises in the compliance of the rules and regulations in the accreditation of agri-tourism farms.

In evaluating the levels of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the enterprises towards EO No. 292 or the guidelines in the accreditation of agri-tourism sites as well as in evaluating the degree of seriousness of the problems encountered by the farms, the descriptive-quantitative evaluation was used, as follows:

Table 2. Descriptive- Quantitative Evaluation on the Levels of Awareness, Acceptability, Readiness to EO No. 292 and Degree of Seriousness

Descriptive Evaluation			
QV	RV	Level of Awareness/ Level of Acceptability/ Level of Readiness	Degree of Seriousness
5	4.20 - 5.00	Very highly aware/ Very highly acceptable/ Very highly ready	Very Highly serious
4	3.40 - 4.19	Highly Aware/ Highly Acceptable/ Highly Ready	Highly Serious
3	2.60 - 3.39	Moderately aware/ Moderately acceptable/ Moderately ready	Moderately serious
2	1.80 - 2.59	Slightly aware/ Slightly acceptable/ Slightly ready	Slightly serious
1	1.00 - 1.79	Not aware/ Not acceptable/ Not ready	Not serious

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Economic Profile of the Agri-tourism Farmers. The agri-tourism farmers had an average age of 46 years old. This implies that majority of the agri-tourism farm owners were in their prime working age and were deemed receptive to innovations and trainings. This result also matches with the report from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies that majority (61.50%) of workers in the agriculture field belong to the 25-54 age bracket in 2015 as well as in 2008 [8].

A great majority (68.75%) of the respondents were college graduates while some had post- graduate degrees (18.75%). This implies a good educational

background among the agri-tourism farm owners. Thus, also indicating that they have pre-acquired conceptual knowledge and skills on either management, agriculture or other areas of specialization.

Agriculture tends to have the least educated work force among the basic sectors. About one-third of agricultural workers did not finish primary school. The most educated workers tend to work in services, followed by industry. However, over time, there has been a gradual improvement in educational attainment of agricultural workers, with a four percentage point shift to the higher education brackets [8].

Further, most (87.5%) of them were married while a few (12.5%) were single. This indicates more experience of farm owners in decision-making; and could also indicate ability of the farm profits to sustain the needs of a family.

Significant to note also is that half (50%) of the entrepreneur-respondents relied on their farms as their main source of income. Only some were employed in either private institutions (19%) or government agencies (18.75%). This implies the impact of agri-tourism farms on serving as a main source of livelihood.

Business Profile of the Agri-tourism Farms

Form of Business Organization. Most (75%) of the agri-tourism farms were established and operated as a single proprietorship form of business. Sole proprietorships have several advantages over other business entities. They are easy to form, and the owners enjoy sole control of the business profits [9]. Meanwhile, three of the agri-tourism farms have been organized as partnerships while only one has been established as a corporation.

Number of Years of Operation. Results revealed that many (37.50%) of the agri-tourism farms have been operational for more than 10 years. The average length of operational period of the agri-tourism farms was 11 years. However, these farms used to operate as production-oriented farms. It was only in the recent years that these farms were transformed into agri-tourism farms with the advent of agri-tourism farm sites gaining popularity in the country; and with the aggressive thrust of the province to make La Union be known as the “Heart of Agri-tourism in Northern Luzon” by 2025.

Farm Accreditation. One of the provisions in the Farm Tourism Act of 2016 is for the government to provide for the registration, accreditation and issuance of identification cards to farm tourism professionals

and operators. As stipulated on RA 10816, the DOT and DA shall jointly promulgate and enforce the standards and guidelines on the accreditation of farm tourism sites. Findings of the study revealed that most (62.5%) of the farms have already been accredited by the DOT and DA-ATI. Meanwhile, some (37.5 %) of the farms have not yet been accredited by any of these agencies concerned. This could be attributed to the preconception of the farm entrepreneurs that accreditation involves tedious preparation of voluminous documentary requirements as well as additional expenses for their farms. Some also do not see the value of accreditation in their business (Table 3).

Table 3. Accreditation Status of Farms

Farm Accreditation Status	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Accredited by DOT	5	31.25
Accredited by DTI	4	25.00
Accredited by both DOT and DTI	1	6.25
Not accredited	6	37.50
Total	*16	100.00

Reasons for Engaging in a Farm Tourism Enterprise. Among the reasons which have encouraged the entrepreneurs to establish their agri-tourism farm, being able to generate more opportunities to increase revenues as well as being a promotional tool for local products being sold by the enterprise were ranked first. These reasons reflect the income-multiplier effect of attracting tourists in the farm. Aside from increasing the potential sales from agricultural produce, the farmers also gain from entrance fees, service fees for farming activities and other amenities that their agri-tourism farm offer.

Type of Agricultural Activity Engaged in by the Farm. A greater majority (68.75%) of the agri-tourism farms were engaged in crop production. Next in rank were processing of agricultural by-products (37.5%) and livestock production (25%) while a few are engaged in poultry, fishery and forestry-related activities. This implies that the farms are engaged in varied types of agricultural activities.

Land Area of the Agri-tourism Enterprise. Many (43.75%) of the farms had a land area of one hectare or less. On average, the farms in the province had a land area of 2.5 hectares. This indicates that an agri-tourism farm could be established and operational even with a limited land area.

Key Features/Amenities of the Agri-tourism Farm. Most of the farms were engaged in the selling of agricultural products (87.50%) and offer farm tours to their clients (81.25%). Meanwhile, 43.75% of the farms offer accommodation services and farm experiential activities. These activities include pick-and-pay of agricultural produce, trainings/seminars and other hands-on activities in the farm. As cited by Yap [11], farm tourism involves agricultural-based activities which can provide training for visitors and farmers who practice natural farming, and a venue for outdoor recreation.

Mode of Transportation in Reaching the Farm Site. One crucial factor in the operation of an agri-tourism farm is its accessibility to customers. Different modes of transportation should be readily available in order for people to easily locate and reach the farm site. Almost all (93.75%) of the farm sites can be reached through riding on a tricycle. This indicates that most of the farm sites are beyond national roads and additional costs for transportation are being borne by the clients considering the distance travelled from the national road to the farm site. This result also affirms the urgent need to intensify infrastructure development in the province to cater the development of various industries [5].

Number of Employees of the Agri-tourism Farm. Results of the study show that half (50 %) of the farms have one to five employees while many (31.25 %) have six to ten employees. On average, the farms employ 7 persons. This implies the farms' impact on generating employment for people in the locality.

Presence of Guidelines/Standards of Service for Employees. One core function of management is directing employees and ensuring that a set of standards for service are met. To attain this, it is necessary to establish a set of guidelines or standards of service for employees. Results revealed that most (75%) of the farms have a set of guidelines/standards of service for their employees. This implies that the agri-tourism farms are intentional in ensuring good quality service from its personnel

Presence of Guidelines/ Rules for Visitors. Most (75%) of the farms have a set of guidelines/rules for visitors posted on the farm premises. This implies that the agri-tourism farms are intentional in ensuring safety and order. Further, such rules or guidelines are deemed necessary, like the case of Boracay Island, which was temporarily closed for six months in 2018 for rehabilitation purposes. In October 2018, the

government re-opened the island with certain rules and regulations to prevent the island from reverting back to the reason why it was closed [12].

Current Status of the Agri-tourism Farms

Rate of Visitorship. On average, the number of visitors in the agri-tourism farms on a daily basis was 75 persons. This indicates a good potential of the farms in attracting tourists. However, there are some agri-tourism farms which declared that visitorship in their farms cannot be monitored on a daily basis for the visits are seasonal and usually scheduled a few times in a month.

Trend of Visitorship. Since the concept of agri-tourism is still in its introductory to early growth stage in the province, it is deemed important to determine its trend in terms of visitor arrivals.

Most (87.50%) of the farms claimed to have an increasing trend of visitorship in the number of visitors in the past three years. This indicates a good potential for the continuous development of the agri-tourism industry in the province.

Most (71.43%) of the farms have claimed that their peak season is during the months of April to June which coincides with the summer season in the country. On the other hand, majority (57.14%) of the farms claimed to have their low season during the months of July to September which coincides with the rainy season in the country. This indicates that farm visitorship is negatively affected by the rainy season (Table 4).

Table 4. Peak and Low Seasons of the Farm Sites

Quarter	Peak		Low	
	f	%	f	%
January to March	4	28.57	1	7.14
April to June	10	71.43	2	14.29
July to September	3	21.43	9	64.29
October to December	5	35.71	4	28.57
Total	22	100.00	16	100.00

Climate has been identified as a key driver for tourism and an important destination attribute. Seasonality has been described as one of the main challenges of tourism's viability. Further, tourism's seasonality is not only driven by climatic conditions at the destination and tourists' home countries, but also by institutional factors such as school, national and religious holidays [14].

Tourists' motivation of experiencing a certain climate has been confirmed in tourism demand

studies. For example, studies in UK, Canada and Germany show that besides destination choice, climate is also an important factor for the timing of travel.

Degree of Seriousness of Problems Encountered. Based on Porter’s Five Forces Model a list of common business problems were listed and were then rated by the agri-tourism farm entrepreneurs according to degree of seriousness. Other problems encountered which were not included in the questionnaire were identified by the respondents themselves.

Among the problems listed, accessibility to customers and problems concerning environmental factors such as pests and diseases, drought and natural calamities were rated as moderately serious problems. Many of the farms are far from the national roads while some are located in far-flung barangays. On the other hand, the farms engaged in crop production specifically those engaged in grape farming experienced problems on pests and diseases. Further, drought and natural calamities such as typhoons are also crucial problems encountered by the farms. (Table 5)

Table 5. Degree of Seriousness Of Problems Encountered

Indicators	Mean	Descriptive Evaluation
1. Accessibility to customers	3.00	Moderately serious
2. Environmental factors	2.92	Moderately serious
3. Lack of facilities	2.83	Moderately serious
4. Limited capital	2.58	Slightly serious
5. Lack of Marketing/Promotional support systems	2.50	Slightly serious
6. Seasonality of commodities	2.42	Slightly serious
7. Tight Competition	2.25	Slightly serious
8. Lack of technical skills of employees	1.67	Not a problem
Weighted Mean	2.40	Slightly serious

These findings are in line with some of the identified gaps in Philippine agri-tourism development, as presented by the DOT Farm &

Ecotourism Team in a farm tourism workshop held by SEARCA on 2018. These gaps include absence or lack of marketing support or corresponding financial incentives; lack of infrastructure support to develop farm to market roads and access roads to the farm; lack of assistance for farm sanitation and energy management; absence of a farm tourism information system; absence of subsidies for farmers to attend to international conferences to benchmark against international models; and inadequate knowledge on manpower needs, sustainable practices and lack of data on sustainable farm tourism [15].

Level of Awareness, Acceptability and Readiness of the Agri-Tourism Farms to the Requisites of EO No. 292/ IRR on the Accreditation of Agri-Tourism Farms

The E.O. No. 292 indicates the implementing rules and regulations governing the accreditation of agri-tourism/farm tourism sites in the Philippines. It outlines the crucial factors and indicators necessary for a farm to be considered an agri-tourism/farm. The IRR outlines the crucial factors and indicators necessary for a farm to be considered an agri-tourism/farm tourism site and serves as a guide for agri-tourism farms to comply with. The factors considered in the IRR are location, facilities/amenities, infrastructure (support facilities), operations, safety and security and sanitation.

Results (Appendix A) revealed that the entrepreneur-respondents have a very high level of awareness on factors such as location, infrastructure (support facilities), operations, safety and security and sanitation; and a high level of awareness on facilities/amenities. Generally, the entrepreneur-respondents are very highly aware on the requisites of E.O. No. 292. This implies a good potential for the development of the agri-tourism farms, as guided by the indicators in the IRR.

On the level of acceptability, their guidelines are generally perceived to be very highly acceptable. This also implies a good potential for the further development of the agri-tourism farms, as acceptability could eventually lead to compliance of the rules and regulations set forth in the IRR.

In terms of level of readiness, the agri-tourism farms are perceived to be very highly ready in terms of location, operation and sanitation. This indicates that the farms are situated in generally safe and peaceful locations; the farm operations are sustainable, being operational for at least three (3)

months in a year; and sanitary measures are being observed in the farms. Meanwhile, in terms of facilities/amenities, infrastructure (support facilities), safety and security, the agri-tourism farms are perceived to be ready. This signifies that the farm sites have the basic facilities/amenities of an agri-tourism farm, infrastructure or support facilities are available; and measures pertaining to safety and security are being observed. Over-all, the agri-tourism farms are perceived to be ready in their compliance to the IRR in the accreditation of farm sites.

Relationship of the Agri-Tourism Farm Owners' Profile with their Level of Awareness, Acceptability and Readiness to Requisites of IRR Governing the Accreditation of Agri-Tourism

The farm owners' profile, specifically their age, sex and educational attainment were subjected to correlational analysis with the level of awareness, acceptability and readiness of agri-tourism farms to EO No. 292.

Results revealed that the socio-economic factors mentioned have no significant relationships to the level of awareness, acceptability and readiness of the agri-tourism farms to the requisites of the IRR.

Recommended strategic plan for agri-tourism development in La Union

Considering the salient results of this study, a strategic plan was crafted as a recommendation for agri-tourism industry development in the province. The structure of the plan was framed on the general strategic tourism development plan of the province of La Union CY 2018-2025. The plan would serve as enrichment for the Agri-tourism component of the existing strategic plan of the province.

The current situation of the farms are first stated. In response to this, strategies aimed at specific objectives, cost estimates, lead responsible agencies/partner and specific success indicators were determined.

CONCLUSION

A databank on agri-tourism farm sites be created to monitor and support the growth of this new industry.

Majority of the agri-tourism farm owners were in their productive working age, college graduates, married, dominated by male and relied on farming as main source of income. Thus, they are more receptive to trainings and innovations in the industry. Majority

of the farms were already accredited by DOT and ATI. There was also consciousness of the income-multiplier effect of attracting tourists in the farm. Further, an agri-tourism farm could be established and operational even with a limited land area. Hence, it is easy to start up and be considered an additional source of revenue for typical production-oriented farmers.

There was a high rate and observed increasing trend of visitorship among the agri-tourism farms within the past three years. Thus, indicating positive potentials of further development of the agri-tourism industry in the province.

Dry and wet seasons affected the inflow of tourists. Peak season was observed during the months of April to June while low season was observed during the months of July to September.

There is a good potential of the industry considering the high levels of awareness and acceptability and adequate level of readiness of the agri-tourism farms to the requisites of the IRR, as stipulated in EO 292. Remarkably, the agri-tourism farm owners' awareness, acceptability and readiness for the agri-tourism farm guidelines are not significantly related with their age, sex and educational attainment. Thus, there is a strong likelihood that agri-tourism farm owners are ready to accept the agri-tourism farm guidelines for accreditation along with their awareness of these.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The crafted strategic plan for agri-tourism is recommended as enrichment to the existing strategic tourism development plan of the province, specifically for its agri-tourism component. Results from the study may also be used by policy makers in creating support systems such as programs, projects and policies relevant to agri-tourism industry development on the micro and macro levels.

Further researches on agri-tourism are recommended to be conducted to include factors on profitability, preferences of tourists and ~~Socio~~ economic as well as environmental impact of the farms to the locality. A databank on agri-tourism farm sites is also recommended to monitor and support the growth of this industry.

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