

Strawberry Picking as an Agritourism Activity at Uluguru Mountains, Tanzania

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Abstract

Agritourism has the potential to link agriculture with culture and tourism, as an alternative form of tourism in rural areas. Despite contributing to the local economic growth, agritourism can significantly contribute to the growth of the national income as well. This study was conducted along the Uluguru Mountains, Morogoro region with the aim to assess the prospects of agritourism development as a key factor to the growth and sustenance of rural economy. This qualitative research adopted an exploratory method of inquiry where interviews were conducted to individuals growing strawberries along the Uluguru Mountain. A total of 14 strawberry farmers were involved. Data saturation was used as a cut-off point during data collection. Secondary data were collected from various sources to gain insights and relevant information regarding farm tourism, specifically agritourism practices. Content analysis was performed to categorize ideas and generate patterns. Results indicate that, Uluguru Mountains has fertile agricultural land that supports growth of varieties of crops (mostly vegetables and fruits). Specifically, strawberry farming has a great potential to develop agritourism along the Uluguru Mountain as it is unique agricultural practice. Similarly, strawberry farming tours present diverse opportunities for the communities to generate additional income. However, many challenges prevent the same. Farmers lack of skills to combine strawberry farming with tourism activities; lack of awareness, limited accessibility of farm sites and poor marketing of the products are major drawbacks of agritourism development in the area. It is therefore important to train farmers to promote agritourism without displacing the key activity of food production, as well as developing entrepreneur skills among the farmers to attract larger markets. Furthermore, regional coordination as well as forging partnership among stakeholders along the strawberry value chain is important to develop and sustain agritourism in the area.

Keywords

Agritourism, Rural Tourism, Uluguru Mountains, Farm Tourism

1. Background

Agritourism, agrotourism or agricultural tourism is a widely debated topic in the scientific literature. The Italian legislative system defines agritourism as tourism activities exercised by farmers through the exploitation of their own farm according to logic of connection (Lopez & Garcia, 2006). The term agritourism is often understood as synonym for farm tourism, farm-based tourism and rural tourism (Hjalager, 1997). It is also defined as an alternative form of tourism that promotes recreational activities amongst tourist who pay a certain sum of money for firsthand experience of the living environment within the farming community, either as resident guests or day trippers (Busby & Rendle, 2000; Torres, 2003). As such, agrotourism can be a key activity in sustaining progressive rural economy. All these definitions present common point in the rural-agricultural context where services are provided (Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

Generally, agritourism refers to leisure travel and experiences related to farm, ranch, or other agricultural industries. It is a form of tourism service provided by agricultural entrepreneurs within their own farm, allowing visitors to take part, direct or indirectly in agricultural activities (Hjalager, 1997; Welteji & Zerihun, 2018; Lak & Khairabadi, 2022).

Agritourism is basically the amalgamation of tourism and agriculture, in which tourism activities are defined by farmers through utilization of their own farm. Such activities are defined and developed on a working farm with the objective of attracting tourists for revenue (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008). Popular agritourism activities include vineyard, ranches, orchards and horticultural tours.

Agritourism activities are increasingly becoming an important component of many farm operations by drawing visitors to farms. Generally, agritourism is an evolving and progressively significant system of tourism, which is relevant to both developed and developing countries (Awan et al., 2016), including Tanzania. Like in other tourism activities, tourist's enjoyment and experience of agritourism activities are also realized through excitement, discovery, and anticipation (Ogidi & Odiba, 2014). To farmers, agritourism presents a means of diversifying farm operations and is a potential source of additional income (Torres, 2003). It may also present an opportunity to enhance relationships between farms, ranches, and other agricultural operations and surrounding communities.

Through agritourism, tourists get to know various local agricultural practices, including how crops are grown, harvested and processed as well as understanding of other farming practices (Pandey & Pandey, 2011). In particular, agritourism farm may offer services such as meal provision (including local foods), farm tour, on site processing of agricultural goods to mention but few (Phillip et al., 2010).

Agritourism is gaining worldwide recognition as an authentic opportunity for linking agriculture and tourism activities to enhance rural household incomes as well as sustainable local economic development (Lak & Khairabadi, 2022). Know-

ing these prospects is important as agritourism can be developed as an activity to rejuvenate non-profitable agricultural activity, to enhance tourism experience and boost rural economies (Khanal & Shrestha, 2019). To the study site, it is important, because the livelihoods of the local communities surrounding Uluguru Mountains are smallholder farmers, hence harnessing such a linkage is important for diversifying their livelihood options. The main objective of this paper is to disclose the prospects of agritourism development along Uluguru Mountains that can be a key factor in sustaining progressive rural economy, using strawberry farming. Having tours on strawberry farms allows visitors to experience farm life and better understand strawberry ecology.

Strawberry farming in along the Uluguru Mountains and nearby areas was first introduced by German in 1911. They were cultivating and export the fruits abroad. After the end of German domination, indigenous people did not immediately take consideration on the crop so it vanishes. After several years, an old man Issa Madeng'o who gained idea of producing strawberry from the German, reintroduced the crop back to the mountain areas. Since then, the knowledge of strawberry farming advanced by introducing new variety from Austria at various sites along the Mountain (Mwatawala et al., 2006), and strawberry farming expanded and continued to date.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism-Agriculture Linkage

The definition of agritourism has expanded to encompass nearly any activity in which a visitor to the farm observes or participate in an agricultural process (Barbieri & Mahoney, 2009). Agritourism is understood to take place on working farm, generate income for add value to the farm, and involve visitor participation in, or observation of farm activities (Barbieri & Mahoney, 2009). A farm diversified into agritourism is somewhat more complex than those operations focused solely on agricultural production or tourism. This complexity is created by the many different activities and functions that are incorporated into agritourism, including both agricultural production and managing daily visits and special events, as well as marketing and customer service (McGehee, 2007; Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005).

Agritourism offers many benefits for the farm and even surrounding communities. It is suggested as a solution to the economic stress facing many agricultural producers in an era and rapidly increasing land values and food production restrictions (Salamon, 2003). The emphasis on agritourism as an economic engine for development in rural areas includes benefits resulting from that development. This includes, employment opportunities with local business, especially shops and restaurants, which exist in response to market demand created by visitors (Saxena et al., 2007). However, in non-economic benefits of agritourism have also been document for both the participating farms and their local communities in terms of accomplishing individuals' goals and increasing op-

opportunities within local areas, as can identifying demographic, cultural and institutional factors that played a role shaping and increasing opportunities. Other benefits have been identified for the farm family such as maintaining rural lifestyle (Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007) and encouraging youth to remain in rural areas by creating local opportunities (Barbieri & Mahoney, 2009). Local communities may also benefit from increased awareness and preservation of local customs, especially those related to food production and preparation aspects of tourism in agricultural setting (Everett & Aitcheson, 2008).

Community involvement is a very important aspect in agritourism activities, and may be defined as a form of voluntary action through which individuals take the opportunity to uphold social responsibility (Tosun, 2000). Similar to any other development projects, there will be those who support and those who oppose agritourism activities, based on their own distinctive views. Various reasons are put forward by those who are in opposition. However, according to Tosun's (2000) findings, majority of communities in local destinations are eager to take a leading role, either directly or indirectly, in agritourism activities.

Agritourism has the potential to link agriculture with culture and tourism, as an alternative to 3S tourism. It is one of the most extensive and influential forms of tourism in Austria (Sharpley & Vass, 2006), Germany (Oppermann, 1995), Norway (Haugen & Vik, 2008), Greece, Poland, and China (Upadhyaya, 2006) and other parts of Europe and America. In developing Countries, agritourism has been extensively used to escalate the financial growth of rural as well as the national income. An important feature is to fortify attentiveness of local communities regarding benefits resulting from the development of this non-agricultural source of income. It will eventually lead to job creation in sectors serving agritourism, revenue growth, alleviating poverty and will improve living standards of communities involved.

The majority of agritourism operations serve as supplemental sources of income while agricultural production remains the primary focus. However, the benefits of revenue from agritourism activities as an alternative to revenue from other sources may be specific to individual farms and not all benefits are universal (Veck et al., 2006). Research has identified an opportunity for agritourism activities in promoting the survival of the farm business, allowing the farm operator and their family to continue farming and enjoying their rural lifestyle (Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007).

2.2. Relevance of Agritourism along Uluguru Mountains

Agriculture is the primary economic activity for 80% of the Tanzanians, majority being small holder farmers (Mkonda & He, 2018). Similarly, along the Uluguru Mountains, communities practice small scale agriculture in a fragmented landscape. With a fertile land, Uluguru Mountains support growth of different crops such as banana, maize, beans, sweet potatoes, rice, millet, variety of vegetables and fruits such as strawberries.

Strawberry has a variety of use, including as an ingredient in jams, yoghurt, juices, cookies, perfumes as well as consumed as raw fruit. In Tanzania, Strawberry has high demand in the market, mostly imported from neighboring countries. Along Uluguru Mountains, there are small-scale farmers producing strawberries at Turo, Kisosa, and Morning sight areas, where climatic condition is suitable for the crop. Given its high demand, strawberry attracts a good price in the market. In retail market, one kg of strawberry range between Tsh. 5000/= to 10,000/= depending on the season. This is substantial amount of income to farmers, given the generation of low revenue from farming activities. Along the mountain range there are a variety of tourist attractions and activities, including waterfalls, scenic viewpoints, endemic birds and reptile species as well as hiking opportunity, which add as an additional tourist activity to strawberry farm visitors.

3. Methodology

The Uluguru mountain lies between latitude 7°S and 8°S and longitude 37°E - 38°E with the altitude range between 300 m - 2600 m above sea level. The mean annual temperature is about 24.3°C. Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews with the strawberry farmers focusing on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of strawberry picking as an agritourism activity along the Mountain. Data saturation was used as a cut-off point to determine the sample size during data collection. A total of fourteen (14) farmers were interviewed in the process of data collection. Document analysis provided insights to previous literature related study topic, more so on strawberry farming. Content analysis was performed to categorize ideas and generate patterns.

4. Results

This section provides results that are presented using the SWOT analysis. Discussion is embedded in the results to enhance the relevance of what provided by communities during interviews.

4.1. Strength of the Area to Support Agritourism Activities

Uluguru Mountains offers various potentials that supports strawberry picking as tourism activity because natural conditions of the area are conducive for strawberry farming. Presence of tourist activities and tourists visiting serve as an additional value to the site. Other tourism activities such as hiking, bird watching and swimming at Hululu water fall provide an added advantage to visitors coming for strawberry picking tours. Also, many farms are accessible by road. Best time to visit is during dry season months.

Presence of knowledgeable strawberry farmers make it easier to transform farmers to accommodate/diversify farming activities to include farm tourism where visitors could get the opportunity to explore strawberry farming and pick

their own fruits. There is one tourist cottage at Morning Sight area which can accommodate individuals or families visiting the area. Given its heritage value, the cottage itself is an attraction to many visitors in the area. Moreover, there are three campsites, as well as other services for campers. Local guides are also available to offer guiding tours to solo visitors.

4.2. Weaknesses of Strawberry Farming as Agritourism Practice

Most of the farmers cultivate strawberries for sustenance and not tourism. Since they cultivate strawberries with no direct market, many shifted to other crops such as maize, beans and bananas which have ready and direct market. Also, there is no permanent customer for strawberries since most of the customers are middlemen from Dar es Salaam who are not interested with tourism activities. These middlemen perceive strawberry picking tourism as a threat to their business since their sells will go down due to direct opportunities visitors will have to purchase from the farm. Despite being accessible, road accessibility to strawberry farms is still narrow, which brings an obstacle to tourists who want to use tour vehicles/buses.

4.3. Opportunities of Strawberry Picking Tours

Strawberry farms provide direct opportunities to communities, especially those employed to work on farms. The presence of strawberry picking activities will enable farmers to sell their strawberries right from the farm to visitors hence widening their market. This is due to the increasing trend of visitors to the site especially those interested with farm-to-table concept.

Further, the study revealed that, agritourism in the area has significant contribution to the economic development of the participating communities. The positive contributions are income generation from both agriculture and tourism services. Over half of the responded (>50%) claim that strawberry farming is their main a source of income through direct selling of products (fruits) to the customers. One kg of strawberry on the farm goes for Tsh 5000 during the low season and goes up to Tsh 8000 during high season. The capital gained from strawberry business is invested back in other income generating activities.

4.4. Challenges of Strawberry of Strawberry Farming for Agritourism

Strawberries need much care compared with other crops. Land preparation, weeding, manure and transport of the fruits requires funds which sometimes may be hard for farmers to have. Tending strawberry farm requires high amount of money simply because unhealthy plants produce fruits which can be difficult to sell in the market. Strawberries are prone to diseases such as gray mold. Further, Strawberry production in the area has relatively low yields with a narrow harvest window hence making it not a sustainable crop to rely on. Lack of permanent market for selling their crops create another challenge since most of the

farmers depend on the middlemen, hence farmers are losing a huge chunk of profit.

5. Conclusion

The result of the study shows that strawberries picking tourism has potential to be nurtured in the area despite of different challenges facing farmers. This may be attributed to the favorable climate that supports strawberry farming system as well as existing tourism activities and supports services in the area. Communities living around the area are not informed of the value and importance of strawberry picking in attracting tourist; hence little effort is placed by farmers on the crop. Agriculture is the mainstay of the area, but the geographical terrain and the small, fragmented patterns of land ownership make it difficult to earn a decent livelihood. Improvement of infrastructures like roads will facilitate accessibility of the area as well as easy transportation of production. Cooperative unions need to raise awareness and provide incentives to farmers in order to make them being together since it seemed they cultivate on individual basis.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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