

Editorial

Exploring New Opportunities for Agritourism in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract: COVID-19 has exerted a tremendous impact on tourism and hospitality businesses. Agritourism is no exception, and the impacts have been both negative and positive concerning the activity of agricultural production. Online direct selling of farm products is a good example of a positive outcome and has contributed to the resilience of agritourism, compensating for the revenue drop from tourism activity. This aspect is unique to agritourism farms. Since COVID-19 stimulated new activity, it is necessary to nurture skills that take advantage of these emerging opportunities in the post-COVID-19 era. Further, we must explore innovative avenues, such as rural e-hospitality, preventive medical effects, and compatible entrepreneurship between those engaged in individual agritourism and community-based tourism. For this purpose, we need to accumulate empirical evidence on these preventive medical effects provided by agritourism in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; agritourism; rural tourism; net-direct selling; e-hospitality; community-based tourism

1. Impact of COVID-19 on Agritourism: Both Negative and Positive

COVID-19 has had a serious impact on the tourism and hospitality industries, and resilience among these business operators has become a major concern [1]. Agritourism is no exception. Recovery from the pandemic has been studied [2,3]. Ref. [4] evaluated the impact of COVID-19 on poverty in Tanzania through a microsimulation with a social accounting matrix and found that poverty increased, and inequality decreased. Concerning agritourism, evaluations of the impact of COVID-19 on agritourism were conducted from the supply and demand sides [5–10]. Ref. [5] conducted a case study on diversified farms facing COVID-19 in central Italy and stressed the adaptability of these farms and the importance of networking among diversified farms. Ref. [6] investigated agritourism farms in Italy and pointed out the key role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and co-creation behavior in resilience. Ref. [7] surveyed Polish agritourism farms for profitability during the pandemic and found that agritourism was still profitable in 2020. Ref. [8] investigated Italian Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) data and observed that 37% of farms had a significant liquidity crisis, and 60% of them had decreases in revenue. On the demand side, [9] studied Polish agritourism farms in 2021 and noted that well-educated and well-off city residents were the main customers of agritourism and that the relatively low risk of COVID-19 infection was an important reason for choosing agritourism. Ref. [10] investigated changes in mobility in Sweden due to COVID-19 and mentioned that domestic vacation houses were favored in less populated areas that provided open-air and nature recreation.

Post-COVID-19 positioning had already begun worldwide as of March 2023 [11–14]. Resilience issues have been explored worldwide. Ref. [11] investigated the Brunei case, stating that diversification of activity and digital transformation were effective countermeasures for improving the resilience of agritourism. Ref. [12] using empirical evidence from the USA noted that farm diversification contributed to the resilience of agritourism during COVID-19. Ref. [13] employed the method of tourist choremas to investigate the capitalization of tourist



Citation: Ohe, Y. Exploring New Opportunities for Agritourism in the Post-COVID-19 Era. *Agriculture* **2023**, *13*, 1181. <https://doi.org/10.3390/agriculture13061181>

Received: 27 April 2023

Accepted: 29 May 2023

Published: 1 June 2023



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resources in the Oltenia region, Romania. Ref. [14] cited diversification as an effective measure for increasing resilience from a survey of Italian agritourism farms. Ref. [15] studied a new preference among city dwellers toward rural and agritourism generated during COVID-19 in Japan, which were nearby trips, i.e., “micro tourism,” and the combination of work and vacation, i.e., “workcation”. Thus, we can say that diversification and digitalization were commonly observed, indicating the evolution of agritourism across the globe.

Thus, COVID-19 impacted agritourism both negatively and positively. Now let me elaborate these points further. In the initial stage of the pandemic, every tourism- and hospitality-based business had to shut down, including Agritourism businesses. This caused severe drops in revenue, although the drop was milder than other tourism-based businesses, who often had to shutter their businesses permanently. In common with other tourism and hospitality businesses, agritourism was also negatively impacted. In addition, agritourism farms are producers of foodstuffs as well. Thus, during the highly rampant COVID-19 period, demand from culinary businesses dropped sharply due to the closures of the tourism and hospitality sectors.

To cope with that plunge in food demand, agritourism farms shifted their sales channels toward direct sales online to avoid the risks of in-person contact and converted from a Business-to-Business model to a Business-to-Consumer format [16]. Consumers took the same orientation toward more internet shopping, particularly during the lockdown or semi-lockdown periods. In this respect, COVID-19 significantly contributed to the rapid development of internet marketing in the farm sector. Platforms focusing on the direct online selling of farm products are emerging and attracting farm memberships [17]. The revenue from direct online sales compensated for the sharp drop in agritourism and sales through standard channels, if not fully, during the height of COVID-19. Once begun, this direct online sales channel will likely continue after COVID-19. Thus, it is safe to say that COVID-19 created not only a crunch in demand for rural products and agritourism but also a chance for direct online sales by farmers engaged in agritourism.

Thus, it is safe to say that agricultural production dispersed the risk of tourism activity for agritourism farms during the pandemic. This risk dispersal could only be realized in agritourism because this function could not exist in tourism businesses without farm production. Therefore, a more serious impact of COVID-19 would be inevitable in the tourism business in general because only the existence of farm products sold directly through the internet compensated for the drop in farm income during the pandemic.

One could say that agritourism had a safety net during the pandemic. COVID-19 highlighted a unique function of agritourism that played an important role in the crisis: agritourism businesses also produce food. This condition is supported by the development of information-communication technology (ICT) because direct selling online is an effective channel for avoiding human contact. Thus, the phenomenon of surging direct online sales businesses in the farm sector had two factors promoting it: COVID-19 and the development of ICT for internet businesses.

However, we should remember as it grows that direct online sales will become more competitive; thus, skill enhancement will become a crucial issue for those using online sales channels. In an analysis of the vegetable farmers in Japan who used direct online sales, it was supposed that small farmers took greater advantage of internet platforms than those with larger farms [17]. Therefore, further empirical studies should be performed on who would benefit most from direct online sales. The recovery track of the agritourism business from COVID-19 needs further scrutiny.

2. Toward New Value Creation in Agritourism

It is expected that recovery from the drop in demand for agritourism will be quick in the time immediately post-COVID due to the emancipation of long-restrained travel desires. However, after this rapid demand period, ordinary situations will likely return. That is, the normal situation whereby managerial capability determines business outcomes will return, and the income gap among agritourism farms will widen as the competition among

lodging businesses intensifies. The demand for agritourism will further grow long-term, particularly in Asia Pacific countries and African countries.

Thus, the exploration of the creation of new values related to agritourism is required in the midterm, which will be a topic to explore. Firstly, in connection with the progress of the internet business, “e-hospitality” is expected to increase its importance in the future [15]. “E-hospitality” is defined as hospitality through the internet or digital technology. This direction would include two options. The first is the substitution of human hospitality for that performed by robots. The second would be the hospitality service through the internet. It is safe to say that the evolution of e-hospitality will ask what the essence and advantage of rural hospitality are and how to enhance that.

Secondly, another issue concerning the new value creation, [18] investigated the physiological and psychological effects of forest therapy tourism in Japan, where forest therapy was born and described the easing of mental stress and lowering of blood pressure, which is related to preventive medicine, defined as preventive health effects that enable people to stay in good shape and keep away from illness. Forest therapy tourism has been attracting increasing attention in Europe [19].

This study was among the pioneering multidisciplinary work toward evidence-based agritourism. To clarify, a single disciplinary study will always have limitations due to the multifaceted effects of agritourism and rural tourism. To address this issue, multidisciplinary studies can effectively overcome that limitation. This is why the author has continued to pursue multidisciplinary studies. More researchers will likely embark on multidisciplinary studies with a wider perspective post-COVID-19. I believe that it is a crucial step for the creation of new values for agritourism.

This direction will be part of the evolution of rural and agritourism in the future. For this purpose, it is necessary to investigate the scientific evidence concerning agritourism, which has not yet been fully explored. Evidence-based agritourism will create new value for agricultural and rural resources, which have long been undervalued. This creation of value can enhance sustainable agritourism businesses. However, this value-creation process cannot be achieved without the participation of tourists. In this context, agritourism is an activity that accompanies a co-creation process for a new value.

It is important to collect feedback from tourists to seek a more effective value co-creation process. Thus, studies on the demand side should be further accumulated to monitor evidence and improve the effectiveness of agritourism on the healthy life of tourists.

3. Community-Based Tourism Activity

The harmonization of individual agritourism and community-based agritourism development [20] should complement each other. This is not an issue of which type is superior to the other. It all depends on the endowment of local resources and the orientation of operators and other concerned stakeholders. Community-based tourism development is not limited to the Asian context where traditionally communal work has been deeply rooted in daily rural life. For instance, “Albergo Diffuso” [21] is a good example, which originated in Italy and enables the attainment of an individual operation as a unit of a community network.

Local destination management organizations (DMOs) are expected to play an important role in community-based agritourism development, particularly promoting, reservation, training, and capacity building of individual operators. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon that DMOs do not have enough capability for territorial management and marketing. It is also necessary to investigate DMO performance and determinants that make a difference among DMOs in rural areas.

Another topic that needs to be addressed is how rural tourism DMOs can contribute to nurturing rural entrepreneurship. In this respect, it is necessary to empirically clarify how cooperation and conflict management might be developed between individual agritourism farms and community-based activity in the future.

Funding: This research was funded by KAKENHI, Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research No. 18H03965 and No. 20H0444 from JSPS (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science).

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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