

Which agritourism for the periurban countryside? The cases of Wallonia and of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

To cope with the economic uncertainties of the changes, transformations, and transitions affecting current European and world agriculture, many farmers are rethinking the purposes of their business and are looking to diversify their activities. Taking advantage of certain assets related to their operation and of opportunities for tourism development in the region (such as availability of buildings, subsidies related to ecology and environment images), some of them have chosen agritourism, a tourist activity proposed by the farmer on his/her farm.

The literature includes many studies on this topic, but there is no consensus on terminology, definitions, and concepts: they vary from one author to another and evolve over time. Having distinguished different agritourist typologies in which accommodation is a basic element, we have personally chosen to study agritourism defined as "all tourist and leisure activities and services present in a working farm".

Wallonia and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, our geographical research areas, are neighbouring entities, with similar agriculture, and their tourist markets offer some similarities. Included in rural tourism, agritourism is nevertheless marginal compared to the overall tourist product offered. Some successes might suggest that agritourism could be the panacea against the crisis in agriculture. But is this always the case? Agritourism should be defined, localized, and differentiated. Working on these two periurban entities of Western Europe which are not yet discussed in the literature, we wanted to understand and to identify agritourist dynamics. We wanted to understand the geographic relationship between agritourism, periurban countryside, local resources, and agricultural and tourist specializations. We wanted to understand the logic of the emergence of tourism on a farm and the links between tourist and agricultural functions in a specific spatial context. Finally, we wanted to understand the integration of the motivations of different types of tourists and their reasons for visiting particular regional and local contexts. To do this, we analyse both the location and the agritourist geographical position in relation to the different markets.

To meet the objectives, we conducted a comparative heuristic analysis of agritourism in both territories. We interviewed key organisational representatives (31 persons), we made field observations, documents comparisons... We conducted interviews with various Walloon and Luxembourg farmers (34 life histories) affording different agritourist practices that we synthesized by circumstantial geographical sketches. We conducted surveys with potential tourists (1148 surveys) in seven Walloon and Luxembourg tourist spots. These steps and the statistical and cartographic processing based on the results allowed us to build a heuristic geographical model of the Walloon and Luxembourg agritourism.

The experiences of farmers interviewed allowed us to understand the position of the agritourist system in its spatial context. Each of them develops opportunities and experience threats (economic, social, from heritage) in connection with the launch of the project, a true survival kit in some cases. It appears that agritourism is not always a panacea for farmers. On the farm, the tourist function comes after the agricultural one and is based on the latter, but the agricultural function also benefits from the tourist function because both activities are related. The emergence of tourism is an autonomous decision of the farmers who can be influenced by other actors, including authorities, but also by other factors such as the existence of a local demand or the regional real estate pressure.

There is no particular profile of tourists visiting agritourism, but some features, including those of family, are more favourable to the experience of this type of tourism.

Definitions and representations as well as the reasons and expectations differ depending on the characteristics of the interviewed tourists: urban or rural origin, level of experience. Three agritourist profiles were also highlighted: those seeking accommodation in a rural environment, those who think about accommodation linked to gastronomy, those who prefer accommodation that would be a comfortable basis from which to tour in a tourist area.

The comparison between the experiences of farmers and the expectations of tourists shows that there is a risk of developing different organizational temporalities in the farm "open" to tourists as well as of favouring unbalanced images of agritourism, which could lead to a vision and a promotion of agriculture which does not correspond to its regional reality.

By combining the different results and by linking the typology of the Walloon and Luxembourg agritourist products, the types of rural areas and the geographical components, it appears that agritourism should not only be analysed according to the environmental dimensions, but that the analysis must also take into account other factors such as accessibility, local communities, hospitality, rural development policies, the real estate market, the agricultural orientation of farm operations, as well as the degree of complementarity with tourist spots.

We have demonstrated that agritourism, combining agriculture with tourism, is not developing, either everywhere, or in the same manner, and differs between different types of periurban countryside, depending on local resources. Moreover, agritourism is not always a solution for all countrysides, nor always a path for each farmer, nor always a perfect tourist destination for all tourists. However, even if strict regionalization of agritourism does not seem possible when we consider all the factors involved in the different regions, trends may emerge depending on agritourist types. There is thus a link between agritourism type and countryside type, which the heuristic model we propose should allow to improve in order to increase the convergence between the expectations of the different stakeholders.