

Ecotourism Development through Agro Tourism Initiatives in Western Maharashtra

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[Abstract] Ecotourism is tourism that includes responsible travelling close to nature, conserving the environment, and enhancing the life of the people there. Agro Tourism involves visiting the locations close to the nature and not to harming flora and fauna of that region. This paper attempts to study the trend of “hurda.” Hurda is an age-old delicacy that is a roasted form of tender jowar (sorghum) millet. This conceptual paper elaborates on preserving this age-old agricultural tradition. It also provides employment to many women and youth. For people getting experience of the rural lifestyle, it is the idea behind promoting activities.

[Keywords] ecotourism, agro tourism, educate travelers

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Introduction

The tourism industry is currently an emerging industry with many of the activities focused around natural as well as cultural environments. Ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.” It includes focus on the natural and cultural ecosystem-based activities that generally improve local livelihoods. The purpose is to make travelers aware, to provide financial support for conservation of nature, to benefit the economic development of local communities, and to exhibit respect for various cultures. Ecotourism has the major activity of educating travelers about rich natural resources, including ecological conservation. Ecotourism is all about efforts for nature conservation, community development, and sustainable tourism. It is a movement which began in the early 1980s. Ecotourism is the very first and oldest term made popular in the tourism sector. More recently, developed new terms are sustainable tourism, green tourism, nature tourism, responsible tourism, ethical tourism, mindful travel, conscious travel, and many others. It is tourism that gives importance to awareness of the environment and helps the local community. Ecotourism generally includes visiting the places with the well-being of the community and nature in mind. Ecotourism is one of the booming industries, and it is attracting attention of many people.

The following ecotourism principles are generally adopted:

- Reduce physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts.
- Develop environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Positive experience for both visitors and hosts.
- Financial support for conservation.
- Benefits for industry development.
- Provide memorable experiences.
- Develop and run low-cost facilities.
- Respect the rights and spirituality aspects of the local people and develop partnerships to empower them.

The aim of ecotourism is to create experiences not just for the travelers but to facilitate farmers and everyone in general. This includes taking care of the natural and ecological resources. It takes into consideration providing local people opportunity to earn while helping them to preserve their traditions and

culture. Ecotourism always prioritizes educating tourists to be aware about local, natural environment. The target of ecotourism is to provide benefits to the local community for their development and well-being. Agro tourism is a type of ecotourism that includes visiting a farm and; earning more about agricultural activities. It helps people to immerse themselves into the traditions, cultures, and lifestyles and leaves long-lasting impressions that are not forgettable. Ecotourism is often considered as a tool to preserve natural ecosystems and promote sustainable development. Ecotourism provides an opportunity for tourism to take place while not disturbing the environment and nature. In a responsible way, the tourist explores natural areas, protects the environment, and helps in developing the local people.

Objectives of the research

1. To investigate the existing tourist trend of the hurda party in the Solapur district.
2. To highlight the factors that attract tourists to agro tourism.
3. To identify activities that promote local ecotourism.
4. To analyze agro tourism and encourage farmers under the initiatives of ecotourism.

Methodology

Basically, this paper is a conceptual paper that elaborates on preserving this age-old agricultural tradition. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of this business activity, which is encouraging farmers under the initiatives of ecotourism. The present paper mostly depends on secondary data sources, and, to some extent, primary data collected while visiting these agrotourism-based farms. Most of the findings and issues mentioned in this paper are drawn with the help of secondary data from many research papers, as well as interviews of agro tourism operators in the Solapur district, which belongs to the Western Maharashtra region, and observations made by researcher. The following 12 agro tourism spots in and around Solapur city, which are famous for hurda, are taken into consideration:

1. Vrundawan Lawns
2. Shridharam Farms
3. Picnic Point
4. Abhishek Mala
5. Annapurna Krushi Paryatan Kendra
6. Ratnai Shivar
7. Anandwan Hurda Party
8. Asmita Krushi Paryatan
9. Kalpataru Agro
10. Gawade Farms
11. Singi Mala
12. Jadhav Garden

Discussion

Ecotourism is becoming very popular in India, and many farmers are starting agro tourism centers on their farms to generate additional income. It also creates opportunities for employment, learning traditions, exploration of culture, etc. This makes agro tourism not only a business that creates income for the farmers, but also is a way to foster interaction between farmers and tourists. Agro tourism is a way to add value to farming without adding acreage. Following are the factors that make the agro tourism business successful:

- 1) Land and water resources at site,
- 2) Near urban area
- 3) Good natural site and tourist places near farm
- 4) Good landscape
- 5) Farm close to population centers, urban areas, pilgrims, and historical places
- 6) Easy to reach by train, bus, vehicle, etc.
- 7) Typical cultural background near the farm

Establishment of agro tourism

Agro tourism is a business and employment-generating activity that offers an additional source of income to farmers. An Agro tourism program supports existing and new agricultural enterprises that invite visitors and charge money to the tourists to get farm experience and add value to the current farming businesses. It develops awareness of nature conservation, ecology, and traditional and cultural activities related to farming in that region. There are many benefits to the farmers if they initiate Agro tourism. Agro tourism services can be categorized in three types: supplementary business, complementary business, and primary enterprises.

Supplementary: In the supplementary agritourism enterprise, Agro tourism is considered a minor activity that supports other products in the agriculture sector and creates additional sources of income for farmers and local people. If farmers have agricultural resources, like livestock, poultry, land and water, etc., farmers may decide to invite school groups, urban people, and other interested tourists to the farm several days a month to learn about animals, birds, natural resources, and the plantation and farming sector.

Complementary: In the complementary Agro tourism activities, farmers may offer “Pick – your – Product” programs to the tourists. Farmers who produce fruits and vegetables, etc., can offer such types of opportunities to tourists to come to the farm and pick fresh produce, which they want to do. This is an enjoyable activity for the tourists and profitable to the farmers. In such cases, farmers may sell some produce to the direct market channel, and the remaining produce may be sold through direct marketing channels.

Primary: In a primarily Agro tourism enterprise, the core activity is other than farming activities. All agricultural products are cultivated according to the need of the Agro tourism business and tourists’ expectations. If farmers want to run Agro tourism as a core business activity, they need to invest lots of money in the farm to provide various lodging and boarding facilities for tourists. In such types of the Agro tourism business, farmers can develop their farms according to the professional approach.

Agro Tourism Activity of the Hurda Party in Solapur

Agro tourism is a type of activity that happens on a farm and provides an opportunity to know and learn about the farming process. Agro tourism is not only about visiting villages and enjoying the traditional food, but one of the best things about staying on a farm is that visitors enjoy a stress-free, natural environment. Younger generations come to know about rural lifestyle, like milking the cow, ploughing the field, swimming in a well, and climbing on trees and plucking and eating fresh fruits.

Farmers in Western Maharashtra wait for the winter, as this is the time of harvest of crops and, mainly, jowar in this region. This is the perfect time, for they enjoy a delicacy called hurda—the tender jowar fresh from the farm. Hurda is very nutritious, as it is high in fibre and traditionally eaten millet.

In the Solapur district, the main agricultural produce is jowar (sorghum) millet. That is the reason for the trend of the hurda party. Hurda means tender or young jowar grain -- the main staple grain of people from western region of Maharashtra in India. Hurda is a healthy, seasonal cereal grain on the Maharashtrian snack platter. In the winter season; jowar grain is juicy and very tender. Every year, the hurda party season starts in December and is enjoyed until February. It is the right time to enjoy roasted, tender jowar. Around this time of the year, the jowar is freshly picked by the farmers, roasted, and immediately served. This roasted young jowar tastes awesome and is enjoyed with peanuts, coconut, jaggery, etc. Generally, a farm party is called a hurda party and is organized especially for eating hurda, other traditional delicacies, and side dishes. It is a very healthy option to be eaten in the winter season. It goes well with buttermilk, which supports good digestion.

Tourists enjoy one-day trips while visiting Solapur, especially for the hurda party in which they enjoy the whole day, starting from breakfast, then enjoying bullock cart rides, farming activities, and various outdoor and indoor games. Then there is time for eating hurda. People take rests or sometimes have entertainment programs, like stand-up comedy or mimicry shows that are organized. Then, they have a

traditional Maharashtrian lunch that is enjoyed. After lunch, people take rests, can drink fresh sugarcane juice and buy agricultural produce. After enjoying tea, tourists start their return journey. Most of the travelers visit for the Hurda Party from Pune, Mumbai, and other nearby locations that have easy access to Solapur.

All these 12 Agro tourism centers considered for this study serve approximately 2000 tourist in a season. They require huge amounts of manpower to serve, entertain, and give tourists experience in farming activities. Manpower is required more for roasting and serving hurda. Cooking various traditional delicacies also needs lot of manpower. Each Agro tourism center provides employment for around 25 men and women from the nearby locality. The charges for a one-day hurda Party are, on average, Rs. 500 to 1000 depending on the packages selected. Packages for tourists include only Hurda, Breakfast-Hurda-Lunch-Tea, Hurda-High Tea, Hurda- Dinner, etc.

Results

Agro tourism has been creating lot of business and employment opportunity. These are some of the points that are listed as a result of this study.

A less expensive option -- The expenditure is low in agro tourism, and, therefore, it is affordable to many travelers. At present, many tourists are from big cities with good economic conditions. But agro tourism attracts this class, as well as tourists from small towns and village, too. Agrotourism takes the scope of tourism to a larger scale, as it is less expensive.

Awareness about farming activity -- People residing in cities know very little about farming or village lifestyle. It is rich in traditions, handmade items, food culture, and overall healthy living. Agro tourism makes tourists aware of farming activities, village life, and food culture, which has a good future in the coming days as one of the flourishing industries.

Good Option for enjoying Family -- Farms provide opportunity for enjoyment to people of all ages, like kids, youngsters, middle-aged, and senior citizens, and it includes the whole families. Rural activities, folk dances, dress, delicacies, and nature provide recreation for the whole family.

Being in peace with the nature -- The lifestyle of urbanites has become stressful, and they need to relieve stress. This is the reason people are in search of the options to make life less stressful. They enjoy one or a few days while being close to nature. This has created major demand for agricultural- related activities. Tourists love spending time at a farm, as they feel stress-free and forget their worries for some time.

Demand for organically grown and traditionally cooked food -- People living in cities are now getting bored with fast food, and they really love the traditional taste of recipes prepared by villagers. Tasty and fresh food from the farm is most preferred by health-conscious travelers.

Being close to natural atmosphere -- Rural life is very close to trees, cattle, birds, mountains, lakes, rivers, etc. Villages have different environment, and travelers enjoy being with all these, which are part of nature.

Away from crowded tourist places -- Hotels and resorts at popular places are overcrowded always. Hence, people cannot enjoy them, even by spending a lot of money. Some have made efforts to create a village atmosphere in some resorts, but it does not attract tourists who really need peace and rest.

Business and Employment Opportunity in rural areas - Agro tourism business creates good business opportunity for farmers, as well as for the suppliers of needed goods and services. It creates employment opportunity for the people nearby. This proves to be good source of income for them. It even helps to develop that area as more and more tourists from urban area travel to farms while enjoying agro tourism activities.

Social Aspect of the Study

This agro tourism activity, which is a part of ecotourism, is creating rural/agro entrepreneurs. As farming is very much based on natural and climatic conditions, farmers depend on rains. Farmers' problems and suicides have become major problems in India. In the cases of losses due to heavy or no rains, agro tourism supports farmers by providing source of income, and it may reduce cases of farmers' depression and suicide.

In India, still, agriculture is depending on nature, rains, and other climatic conditions; very advanced techniques are not being used by farmers. Thus, farmers are not equipped with equipment and techniques to understand weather forecasts. In such situations, the agro tourism business helps farmers to generate income from other activities. This type of agro tourism center is creating employment opportunities for the youth from the nearby rural area. Many young and adults in the rural area do not get employment opportunities due to low literacy and absence of industry there. Agro tourism provides great opportunity for them to get seasonal employment, and they can do farming the rest of the time.

Future Scope

Further study can be made regarding marketing strategies and promotional campaigns, so that more awareness will be created, and number of visitors will increase, which may help agro tourism development further. There is a scope to understand problems faced by farmers while starting and running agro tourism businesses. Studies can be done to show support by local government for helping and supporting agro tourism, especially based on the hurda party in the Western Maharashtra region.

Conclusion

Agro tourism is a leisurely activity that helps a people learn and appreciate farming activity. In the last few years, tourism has become much more attractive, especially when it comes to visiting agricultural land. Tourists want relief from their busy urban lifestyles and to enjoy peace. They want to be close to the nature and be more involved in the learning and enjoying of basic farming processes.

The purpose of agro tourism is not just to allow visitors from city to enjoy the rural life, but also as a means to bring the consumers closer to the farmers, thereby eliminating the need for middlemen. The visitors to the farms, orchards, ranches, etc., are encouraged to buy the local produce, such as organic grains, fruits, vegetables, spices, and condiments etc.

It used to be a recreational activity only by the farmers for their friends and relatives, but now it has become a business. Farms all over the state conduct and celebrate hurda parties in Western Maharashtra. It helps people for recreation, enjoy traditional delicacies. The age-old traditional knowledge about farming practices, food, and nutrition are passed on to the next generation, and it preserves knowledge. These agro tourism centres are not only earning a good profit apart from their farm produce, but also creating employment opportunities for many local people. In the future, there is a great opportunity for such business activities. Ecotourism not only covers tourism but sustainable aspects of tourism and by preserving and passing on to succeeding generations the precious knowledge of traditional practices.

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