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What is Agritourism?

By Haverde Warner

Agritourism is a style of travel and vacation that takes place on a farm or ranch and usually presents the opportunity for urban dwellers to engage in agricultural activities, ranging from picking fruit to feeding animals. The earliest providers of an agritourism experience were the dude ranches which fi rst became popular in the 1880's.

Nearly a hundred dude ranches are in operation in the Texas Hill Country today. Other prominent agritourism operations in the Hill Country are wineries, Christmas tree farms, herb farms, and specialized dairies. The major appeal of agritourism to the providers is the creation of a new revenue stream; in New Jersey, agritourism revenue is only 2% of all agricultural revenue-but that 2% is $57,000,000, all of it flowing to small, family owned farms. (Texas' agricultural revenue is 20 times that of New Jersey.)

Agritourism is actually a subset of sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism strives to protect its product-the destination. Protection means preserving natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture. Sustainable tourism supports the integrity of a destination, emphasizing unique qualities while educating visitors and hosts and maximizing economic benefi ts without consuming the destination.

Successful agritourism providers have discovered that a destination needs three things: something to see, something to do, and something to buy. More than 70% of agritourism visitors purchase crafts, clothing, or food products. Craft items made of wood are typically the best sellers.

Many readers may be astonished to know that tourists will pay for the experience of shearing sheep, harvesting grapes, cutting their own Christmas tree, picking herbs, or viewing an archeological site-but they will. Texas has the most rural residents of any state, about four million, but 86% of the population lives in urban areas. Many of those urban dwellers are becoming more interested in how food is produced and the value of being re-connected with rural lifestyles. Agritourism offers both education and entertainment to urbanbased travelers with money to spend.