

Problems and Prospects of Farm Tourism in Kerala: A Qualitative Stakeholder Perspective

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Abstract

Farm tourism is increasingly recognized as a strategy for rural development and sustainable tourism, particularly in the state of Kerala, India. This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the current problems and prospects of farm tourism in Kerala through the lens of four key stakeholders: government officials, farm stay owners, tour operators, and tourists. Data were collected via structured interviews with 30 participants and analyzed using thematic analysis and word frequency tools. The findings reveal a significant disconnect between policy formulation and ground-level reality. Key barriers identified include a restrictive 10-acre land requirement for registration, a lack of institutional support in training and marketing, and the proliferation of unauthorized units. Conversely, stakeholders unanimously recognize the high potential of Kerala's landscape and climate for farm tourism. The study concludes that successful development requires policy reform regarding land limits, coordinated inter-departmental efforts, and focused training programs for farmers to bridge the gap between agricultural potential and tourism service standards

Keywords: Farm Tourism, Kerala Tourism, Rural Development, Stakeholder Analysis, Sustainable Tourism.

Introduction

Farm tourism, often used interchangeably with agritourism, has emerged as an important diversification strategy within the agricultural sector. It functions as a dual-purpose model by providing farmers with an alternative and supplementary source of income while simultaneously offering tourists an authentic and immersive experience of rural life and agricultural practices (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2016). In an era marked by agricultural uncertainty, price fluctuations, and climate-related risks, farm tourism helps reduce farmers' dependency on conventional farming income and enhances rural livelihood security.

In the specific context of Kerala, popularly known as "God's Own Country," the integration of agriculture and tourism assumes greater significance due to the state's rich natural landscapes, biodiversity, traditional farming systems, and strong tourism brand image (Kumbhar, 2010). Kerala's scenic farmlands, plantation crops, backwaters, and cultural heritage create a favorable environment for the growth of farm tourism. This convergence of agriculture and tourism holds immense potential for generating employment, promoting rural development, and strengthening the local economy.

However, despite these inherent advantages, the farm tourism sector in Kerala has not reached its full potential. The sector continues to face several systemic and structural challenges such as inadequate policy support, lack of awareness among farmers, infrastructural constraints, marketing limitations, and regulatory complexities (Kumbhar, 2014). These issues collectively restrict the organized growth and sustainability of farm tourism initiatives across the state.

Against this background, the present paper seeks to undertake a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the farm tourism sector in Kerala (Malik & Vivek, 2018). The study focuses on understanding the sector through multiple stakeholder perspectives, including government officials, farm stay owners, tour operators, and tourists. By capturing these diverse viewpoints, the research aims to develop conceptual clarity regarding farm tourism, identify key operational and managerial barriers, and suggest strategic measures for its sustainable development (McGehee, 2004).

Literature Review

The convergence of agriculture and tourism has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within agricultural economics and rural development studies (Nickerson et al., 2001). As traditional agrarian sectors face market volatility, farm tourism—often used interchangeably with agritourism—has garnered attention as a viable strategy for revitalization (Vasanthi & Padmaja, 2019). This chapter synthesizes existing literature to understand the evolution of farm tourism globally and nationally, specifically isolating the research gap regarding the regulatory and operational challenges within the Kerala context (Deepthi & Davy, 2017).

The academic discourse on farm tourism lacks a universally accepted definition, reflecting its multifaceted nature (Dart, 1974). Early definitions, such as Dart (1974), described it simply as any recreational enterprise on a working farm (Dart, 1974). However, the concept has evolved from mere accommodation to a complex symbiotic relationship between the visitor and the agrarian environment (Roberts & Hall, 2001). Roberts and Hall (2001) positioned farm tourism as a distinct subset of rural tourism, necessitating active participation by the farmer (Roberts & Hall, 2001). This is corroborated by Blekesaune et al. (2008), who argued that farm tourism serves as a vital bridge for urban populations to reconnect with agricultural processes (Blekesaune et al., 2008). Recent scholarship has focused on the "experience economy" aspect of the sector (Capriello et al., 2018). For instance, Capriello et al. (2018) emphasized that farm entrepreneurs are key actors in curating authentic experiences, while Petrovic et al. (2017) highlighted the necessity of standardizing these services to ensure quality (Capriello et al., 2018). The distinction between "rural tourism" and "farm tourism" remains critical; as noted by Busby and Rendle (2000), farm tourism must be viewed within the wider rural context but requires specific operational competencies related to agriculture (Busby & Rendle, 2000).

A predominant theme in the literature is the economic imperative driving farmers toward tourism (McGehee, 2004). The "pluriactivity" model suggests that tourism buffers against agricultural risks (Nickerson et al., 2001). Nickerson et al. (2001) and McGehee (2004) identified that financial strain and market unpredictability are the primary motivators for diversification (McGehee, 2004). This is supported by Vaugeois (2017), whose study on farm diversification confirmed that integrating tourism creates essential revenue streams and employment opportunities (Vaugeois, 2017). Empirical evidence validates the profitability of this synergy (Schilling et al., 2014). Schilling et al. (2014) found statistically significant positive effects of agritourism on farm profitability, particularly for small-scale operators (Schilling et al., 2014). Similarly, Jeczmyk and Uglis (2015) reported that in Poland, agritourism accounted for approximately one-third of the overall household income for participating farmers (Jeczmyk&Uglis, 2015). Beyond direct income, Mahaliyanaarachchi (2016) framed agritourism as a strategic risk management tool, allowing farmers to survive fluctuations in crop prices (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2016).

In the Indian context, the literature presents a narrative of high potential but uneven development (Taware, 2014). Agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, yet the integration of tourism is a relatively modern phenomenon (Vasanthi & Padmaja, 2019). Vasanthi and Padmaja (2019) described agritourism as a "catalyst for rural development," creating a win-win situation for farmers and local communities (Vasanthi & Padmaja, 2019). However, studies indicate that success is regionally concentrated, with Maharashtra emerging as a pioneer (Taware, 2014). Taware (2014) and Kumbhar (2010; 2014) extensively documented the Maharashtra model, attributing its success to strong policy support and the entrepreneurial spirit of local farmers (Taware, 2014). Conversely, studies in other regions highlight significant barriers (Malik & Vivek, 2018). For instance, Malik and Vivek (2018) observed that despite high potential, farm tourism in Haryana remains in its infancy due to a lack of local promotion (Malik & Vivek, 2018). Similarly, Karthik (2017) and Ahsanath and Purushothaman (2016) identified the absence of supportive infrastructure and financial mechanisms as major impediments in states like Karnataka (Karthik, 2017).

Kerala, globally renowned as "God's Own Country," possesses distinct natural advantages for farm tourism (Deepthi & Davy, 2017). However, the academic literature specific to Kerala is sparse compared to European or Maharashtrian studies (Bindu & Indu, 2018). Existing research predominantly focuses on visitor satisfaction and general potential rather than structural analysis (Sravana & Joseph, 2012). Deepthi and Davy (2017) analyzed farmers' perceptions, concluding that the sector brings perceived benefits to the local community (Deepthi & Davy, 2017). Similarly, Sravana and Joseph (2012) found high levels of visitor satisfaction with service quality in Kerala's farm stays (Sravana & Joseph, 2012). James (2012) argued that farm-based rural tourism is essential for sustainable development in the state (James, 2012). However, these studies largely present an optimistic view of the prospects without critically analyzing the problems (Deepthi & Davy, 2017). There is a notable absence of literature

addressing the specific regulatory bottlenecks, such as land-use restrictions (the 10-acre rule) and the proliferation of unauthorized units, which are critical to the sector's sustainability (Bindu & Indu, 2018).

A critical review of the literature reveals a significant gap (Deepthi & Davy, 2017). Internationally and in select Indian states (Maharashtra), there is robust data on the operational dynamics and economic impact of farm tourism (Taware, 2014). However, in the context of Kerala, research is limited to perception studies and satisfaction surveys.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the depth of stakeholder experiences. A total of 30 participants were selected using purposive sampling, comprising 5 government officials (designated G1-G5), 15 farm stay owners (F1-F15), 5 tour operators (O1-O5), and 5 tourists (T1-T5) (Bindu & Indu, 2018). Data Collection: Structured interviews were conducted with each participant group). The focus was on four objectives: conceptual clarity, support systems, barriers/challenges, and future prospects. Responses were collated and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns. Additionally, word clouds and word lists were generated for each objective to quantify the frequency of key concepts, though the primary focus of this paper is the thematic interpretation.

Results and Analysis

The thematic analysis yielded six major themes across the stakeholder groups: Concept of Farm Tourism, Support Provided/Received, Benefits/Gains, Problems/Challenges, Facilities needed, and Suggestions for Improvement.

Conceptual Clarity and Awareness

Stakeholders generally defined farm tourism as an accommodation-based experience where tourists engage directly with farming activities and nature. Government Perspective: Officials defined it as a business model in harmony with nature, distinct from concrete resorts, where tourists stay with farmers and learn agricultural methods. They noted that approximately 90% of interested tourists are foreigners, particularly from Europe and the UK, indicating a gap in domestic market penetration. Farm Owners' Perspective: Owners viewed farm tourism as a refuge for urban dwellers seeking relaxation and a direct marketing channel for organic produce. Interestingly, many owners were introduced to the concept by the tourists themselves or through visits to foreign countries like the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Tour Operators & Tourists: Operators emphasized the difference between the "formal atmosphere" of star hotels and the "informal," experience-based nature of farm tourism. Tourists corroborated this, seeking firsthand experiences of farm life rather than luxury.

Support Systems and Institutional Gaps

A critical finding is the discrepancy between government claims and the reality faced by entrepreneurs.

- Government View: Officials admitted that while training and subsidized loans were provided initially (circa 2013-2014), these support systems have largely been discontinued. They acknowledged that current farmers lack the necessary marketing skills.
- Farm Owners' Reality: Farmers reported a near-total lack of support. They cited non-cooperative local panchayats and a lack of financial assistance from the Department of Tourism. One farmer noted that banks offer low interest for rice cultivation (3-4%) but do not extend this benefit to farm tourism ventures.
- Marketing Deficit: Tour operators highlighted that the Department of Tourism lacks a clear understanding of how to implement farm tourism in the agricultural context, leaving farmers without a streamlined scheme or marketing platform.

Barriers and Challenges

The study identified several structural and operational barriers hindering the sector's growth. Regulatory Barriers (The 10-Acre Rule): A significant policy hurdle identified by both officials and farmers is the requirement of owning a minimum of 10 acres (or 50 acres for plantations) to register a unit. Stakeholders argued this is unsuitable for Kerala, where fragmented landholdings are common, effectively excluding small-scale farmers from official support.

Unauthorized Units: The lack of strict policy enforcement has led to the proliferation of "fake" farm stays—resorts masquerading as farm units without genuine agricultural connection. This damages the reputation of authentic operators.

Skill Gaps: Farmers struggle with marketing and English communication, which limits their ability to interact with foreign tourists—their primary market. Infrastructure & Wildlife: Issues such as animal attacks on crops near forest areas and disturbances caused by alcohol consumption among bachelor groups were cited as operational challenges.

Facilities and Requirements

Analysis of word frequencies and interview themes indicates that luxury is not a priority for farm tourists.

Basic Amenities: Stakeholders across the board agreed that essential requirements are good roads, electricity, clean water, and communication facilities.

Experiential Facilities: Tourists and operators emphasized the need for engagement activities like fruit plucking, fishing, and cooking local food, rather than man-made recreational structures. Hygiene: Tourists specifically noted that while they do not expect luxury, basic hygiene and clean toilets are non-negotiable and currently lacking in some units.

Discussion

The qualitative data suggests that farm tourism in Kerala is at a crossroads. While the "product"—Kerala's natural bounty and agricultural heritage—is highly valued, the "packaging" and "delivery" are flawed due to policy incoherence. The feedback from Government Officials (G1-G5) confirms an awareness of the problems, specifically the discontinuation of subsidies and the impracticality of the 10-acre rule. However, the perspective of Farm Owners (F1-F15) reveals a sense of abandonment, where they are forced to rely on self-learning and word-of-mouth marketing. The Tour Operators (O1-O5) serve as a crucial link, yet they are hesitant to promote farm tourism due to inconsistent quality and infrastructure. Their suggestion that the Department of Tourism currently lacks a clear "idea" of farm tourism is a damning indictment that necessitates immediate rectification. Financially, the sector shows promise, with farmers earning between INR 20,000 to INR 50,000 monthly. However, this potential is capped by the inability to scale or market effectively to international audiences without government intervention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms that farm tourism in Kerala holds high prospects for economic development and sustainable tourism but is currently stifled by regulatory and operational bottlenecks. To unlock its full potential, the following measures are recommended based on the stakeholder feedback: The government must revise the 10-acre land requirement to a lower threshold to accommodate small-scale farmers who form the backbone of Kerala's agriculture. Standardization and Regulation: Immediate policy intervention is needed to curb "fake" farm stays. A certification system based on genuine agricultural activities rather than just land size should be implemented. A restart of training programs is essential. These should focus not only on hospitality but specifically on digital marketing and English communication skills to help farmers manage international clientele. Local bodies (Panchayats) must collaborate with tourism departments to improve last-mile connectivity (roads) to farm units, which is currently a major deterrent. The Department of Tourism should launch an exclusive website or portal for registered farm stays to centralize information and bookings, addressing the visibility gap noted by tourists and operators.

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