

AGRILEISURE: EXPLORING THE “FUN” OF LOCAL FOOD

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Abstract.—Farm-based agri-tourism, home-based hobby farming, rural/urban farmers markets, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) are all examples of agriculturally themed activities that, for many, include a measure of leisure and recreation. While people once saw the farm primarily as a space for work and production, a new generation is beginning to see farms as family-oriented places to visit, experience, and learn. This suggests the emergence of a theoretical concept called “agrileisure” with roots in leisure studies, sociology, social psychology, and geography. This brief conceptual paper will explore the theoretical emergence of agrileisure. With an eye toward future research, we will go beyond this conceptualization to propose a number of research areas critical to a better understanding of the “fun” of local food.

1.0 INTRODUCTION: THE “FUN” OF AGRICULTURAL SPACES

Farm-based agri-tourism, home-based hobby farming, rural/urban farmers markets, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) are all examples of agriculturally-themed activities that, for many, include a measure of leisure and recreation. While people once saw the farm primarily as a space for work and production, a new generation is beginning to see farms as family-oriented places to visit, experience, and learn. This suggests the emergence of a theoretical concept called “agrileisure” with theoretical roots in leisure studies, sociology, social psychology, and geography.

In addition to serving as an organizing feature of recreation activities in agricultural settings, we feel that agrileisure can serve as a lens through which to view agriculture-related social change. One example is the “local food” movement. Local food is often situated in the contexts of healthy living, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. An agrileisure perspective adds the “fun” of local food to this mix, allowing us to explore the relationships between agriculture-themed recreation and changing social responses to the production, procurement, and consumption of food. To this end, this brief conceptual paper will explore the theoretical emergence of agrileisure and propose future areas of inquiry and exploration critical to a better understanding of the “fun” of local food.

2.0 WHAT IS AGRILEISURE?

Agrileisure is a conceptual framework that highlights and organizes the roles of recreation, tourism, and leisure in an agricultural context. As a concept, agrileisure emerges from an intersection of regional sustainability, farm-based recreation, and rural economic development. In practice, agrileisure is the glue that binds the disparate issues of agricultural business, development, and sustainability with a large measure of fun. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the concept of agrileisure.

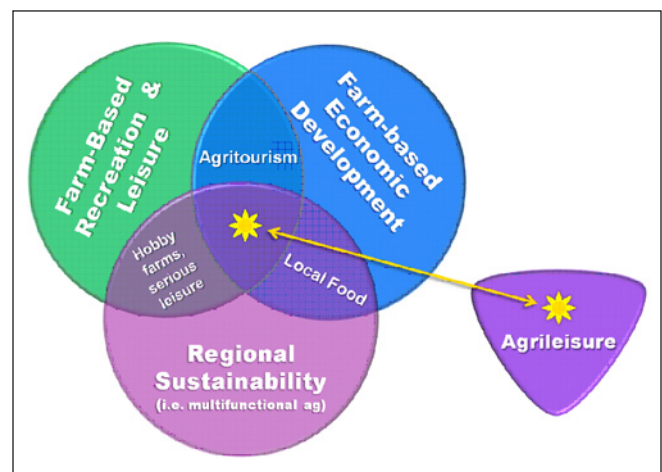


Figure 1.—Theoretical context of agrileisure.

Each of the overlapping areas contains theoretical examples that can be used to describe the emergence of agrileisure. To begin, one example of regional sustainability in an agricultural context is multifunctional agriculture, a concept suggesting that farming produces social benefits beyond the simple production of food (Wilson 2007). These benefits can be both environmental (improvements to land, water) and social (rural employment, community preservation). The benefits of multifunctional agriculture, however, tend to accrue at the national or global scale, and little research has explored the concept at the local level (Lenihan et al. 2009).

Multifunctional agriculture at the local level is comparable in some ways to the concept of serious leisure (Stebbins 1992). Serious leisure is distinguished from other types of leisure by the level of personal investment—the need to participate in a unique subculture, acquire special skills and knowledge, and strongly identify with the chosen pursuit (Stebbins 1992). An example of serious leisure in an agricultural context is hobby farming, which is commonly defined as the act of farming for little or no income. Hobby farmers must acquire skills similar to those of professional farmers and the act of farming requires a commitment of time and resources that exceed many other hobbies. Hobby farming is a local-level manifestation of the social and economic impact (both positive and negative) of farming within the rural-urban fringe. Hobby farms are making important contributions to regional sustainability by selling products at farm markets, engaging in education, and serving as training grounds for beginning farmers.

Farm-based recreation also intersects with rural economic development. Many rural areas are undergoing rapid social and economic change, usually in the form of transition toward a recreation- and tourism-based economy. Farms play an important role in this transition as evidenced by the growth of agritourism. In Vermont, a traditional dairy state, agritourism added \$10.5 million to statewide farm income in 2001, an average of \$5,000 per farm (Aldous 2001). In neighboring New Hampshire,

agricultural tourists spent an estimated \$201 million in 2002, including \$26 million for farm products; this spending resulted in 2,556 full time equivalent jobs, household incomes of \$59.2 million, and \$19.2 million in state and local government revenues (Goss 2003). Expanding the discussion to local foods, the impacts remain important—New Hampshire's local food system is a \$3.3 billion industry that employs 81,000 people statewide, contributing 5.7 percent of the state's \$58 billion economy (Magnusson and Gittell 2010).

Completing the cycle is the relationship between farm-based economic development and regional sustainability. An example of this overlap is the local food movement. Recent research in this area (Born and Purcell 2006, Coley et al. 2009, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Hinrichs 2003, Jarosz 2008) includes efforts to quantify local food consumption/production capacity (Peters et al. 2008, Timmons et al. 2008), attempts to link local food to health outcomes (Gustafson et al. 2007, Nanney et al. 2007), empirical critiques of whether or not locally produced goods use or more less energy than conventionally grown (Coley et al. 2009, Cowell and Parkinson 2003), and efforts to determine the equity and sustainability of local foods (Allen 2008, Allen and Hinrichs 2007, Born and Purcell 2006, Hinrichs 2003, Jarosz 2008, Mariola 2008). Missing, however, are the perspectives of leisure, recreation, and tourism.

3.0 SITUATING AGRILEISURE

Agrileisure, at its core, is about recreation in place. Therefore, it is necessary to situate agrileisure in terms of two oft-invoked theoretical constructs: community and sense of place. To begin, the term community is often broadly conceptualized, from loose affiliations of spatial, social, and normative components (Agrawal and Gibson 1999) to clear distinctions between “territory-free” communities (made up of groups of people, such as “the Internet community” or “the Latino community”) and “territory-based” communities (Theodori 2005). Most relevant to agriculture and leisure, however, is the place-based interactional approach of Wilkinson (1991). His model of community theory suggests that community is

a geographically bounded space in which there are “collective organizations through which residents of a small territory meet their daily needs” (Wilkinson 1991, p.3). Farms are a critical feature of these collective organizations, serving as shared space and territorial referent. Local residents view the farm as a community asset which, in addition to providing food or employment, provides a shared rural identity.

The concept of sense of place is important to the policy implications of agrileisure; it parallels community in terms of how people interact with rural landscapes and each other. Tuan (1977) defined “sense of place” as meanings applied to geographic space. Specifically, sense of place describes what a place means to an individual, rather than how much it means (Stedman et al. 2004). Most definitions of sense of place encompass place attachment (the extent to which people identify with a setting) and satisfaction (how they feel about the condition of the setting) (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995, Relph 1976, Stedman et al. 2004). Researchers have even suggested a biological component (Altman and Low 1992). Given their complexity, place factors are difficult to discern. While sense of place is intricate, fluid, and without boundaries, it is reasonable to assume that local farms—with their history, natural beauty, and contribution to rural regional identities—substantially influence the creation of place-based meanings and attachment.

How, then, is agrileisure related to these notions of community and place? Possible examples include the areas of equity and food justice. Much has been made of the evolution of farmers markets into places that are not welcoming to low-income audiences. Perhaps agrileisure development could include creating community-based outreach materials that appeal to a different (low-income) audience to ensure that people of all incomes feel welcome at farmers markets. A second example is local control. Many farmers markets are relatively unregulated and are therefore free to evolve from simple food venues into more complex social gatherings with music, value-added items, and non-food products. Third, farmers

markets do not just represent nostalgia-based tourism; they have become the ‘village common,’ offering the physical space to gather as well as the opportunity to experience a shared emotional space. This shared emotional space vivifies common values that are perceived as waning in an overbusy and disconnected society. For many, farmer’s markets are a respite and a comfort, serving as a salve to hyper-individualism.

4.0 FUTURE EXPLORATIONS OF AGRILEISURE

Additional scholarship is needed to explore the contribution of agrileisure to agricultural and recreation research, especially in terms of the relocalization of rural food networks. There is little or no existing data in these areas, and few studies have attempted to investigate how the local food movement is influenced by recreation and leisure. A new approach to local food research is needed, one that includes an agrileisure perspective. Knowing more about the “fun” of local food can be an important contribution to the dialogue surrounding agriculture, leisure, and social change.

Fortunately, many of the theoretical contexts from which agrileisure emerges (see Figure 1) provide angles that are relevant to the emerging relationships between agrileisure and relocalization as a form of social change. To begin, agritourism has deep roots in economic development and revenue diversification, two important issues affecting farm sustainability in the long run. Possible areas of exploration include points of entry into emerging food networks, or the role of agritourism in food security. Sample questions include: can agritourism ventures such as pick-your-own orchards or maple sugar operations be springboards into a local food network? Can agritourism, as a community and economic development strategy, promote food security?

A deeper investigation of hobby farms and recreational farming will also provide insight into the relocalization of rural food networks. Work in this area must involve the farmer directly and examine hobby and recreational farmers’ connections to the food

network itself. Specifically, this connection could be financial (in which case it may be moving away from strict “hobby” farming) or it could be related to the enhanced skill development that accompanies serious leisure. Examples of possible questions in this area include: What role, if any, do hobby farmers play in a local food network? Should local food networks contribute to the economic viability of hobby farmers who grow for fun?

A social-psychological lens will also sharpen future agrileisure inquiry. This approach could question the leisure identity and motivation of both producers and consumers: Why do people really visit farmers markets? What would increase visitation? Can markets serve as both community resources and tourist destinations? Do tourism and recreation threaten or contribute to traditional ideas of farm-based sustainability and identity? Inherent in these questions is the idea that some people are motivated to participate in agrileisure out of a sense of tradition, while others are simply exploring the newest fad in healthy eating. Likewise, there may be a measure of fun informing whether local food participants are trying on identities as food activists or simply seeking the most affordable food source. Hinrichs and Kremer (2002) provide a relevant example when they describe a variety of reasons why people participate in community-supported agriculture.

Finally, agrileisure has overlapping implications for public health and place-based education. In addition to the obvious benefits of exercise and fresh air from participation in agricultural activities, there is potential for agrileisure-themed work to teach young people about local food. Knowledge of food origins and preparation is decreasing, to the detriment of our collective health. Embedded in this is the role of place. For example, educators can ask young people to consider their sense of place, their experiences, and their perspectives as they think in new ways about the conditions that lead to conflict, cooperation, and interdependence in the contexts of recreation policy, community development, and environmental sustainability.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The theoretical concept of agrileisure has applied implications for public policy, research, outreach, and collaboration. In terms of policy, an agrileisure perspective reveals new ways of thinking about farm-based rural economic diversification and food distribution, and can be used to promote local food as a strategy for rural development and community sustainability. It can also shed light on visitor/community conflict, position farmer response to risk management, and inform local planning and zoning. In terms of collaboration and outreach, this approach can provide practitioners, researchers, and the public with richer understandings of farmers markets (through tools such as rapid market assessments, focus groups, and/or key informant interviews), quantification of the economic impacts of food tourism, or a means to effectively market the recreational aspects of local food. Examples could include tourism marketing partnerships between recreation/hospitality providers and farmers, or workshops fostering entrepreneurship and innovation in leisure contexts.

Agrileisure could also be used to explore the parallel relationship between place and community. Specifically, agrileisure, in both community and place-based contexts, could be a lens through which to view community development. Agrileisure could also be a factor in the development of “community,” defined as a heightened engagement in the collective actions that help people meet their day-to-day needs. Agrileisure could factor into a more personal, individual type of development in community, predicated on behaviors that not only affect how people participate in communities, but also potentially change their positions within them. Future research as described above may shed light on this possible interaction.

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