

Agritourism in Kerala: Opportunities and Challenges

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Citation: Ajai Kumar. A (2020), Agritourism in Kerala: Opportunities and Challenges, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 26(3) 719 - 725

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v26i3.8435

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Agritourism, an emerging form of tourism that integrates agriculture with travel and recreation, has gained traction in various regions across the globe. In Kerala, known for its vibrant landscapes and rich agricultural heritage, Agritourism offers a unique opportunity to diversify the rural economy while providing authentic tourist experiences. This research article explores the concept of agritourism in Kerala, examining the potential benefits and challenges associated with its development. It also highlights the current status, key stakeholders, and strategic initiatives needed to foster sustainable growth in this sector.

Keywords: Agritourism, Rural Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Agritainment, Guest Ranch, Wine Tourism.

Introduction

Agritourism is an innovative agricultural activity related to tourism and agriculture. It has a great capacity to create additional sources of income and employment opportunities for the farmers. Agritourism is a way of sustainable tourist development and multi-activity in rural areas through which the visitor has the opportunity to become aware of agricultural areas, agricultural occupations, local products, traditional food, and the daily life of the rural people, as well as the cultural elements and traditions. Agritourism is helpful to both farmers and urban people.

Kerala is one of the major tourist centers in India and there is large scope and great potential to develop Agritourism. Kerala, a state situated on the tropical Malabar Coast of southwestern India, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. Named as one of the ten paradises of the world by the National Geographic Traveler, Kerala is famous especially for its ecotourism initiatives. Its unique culture and tradition, coupled with its varied demography, has made Kerala one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Growing at a rate of 13.31%, the tourism industry is a major contributor to the state's economy. The tagline "Kerala – God's Own Country" was adopted in its tourism promotions and became synonymous with the state. Today, Kerala Tourism is a Global Super Brand and is regarded as one of the destinations with the highest brand value.

Agri-tourism is the latest concept in Kerala tourism, which normally occurs on farms. It allows you to experience real enchanting and authentic contact with the rural lifestyle, taste the local genuine food, and get familiar with the various farming tasks during the visit. It provides you a welcome escape from the daily hectic life in the peaceful rural environment. It gives you the chance to relax and revitalize in the pure natural environment, surrounded by nature's magnificent setting.

Agritourism combines the agricultural sector with tourism to create a symbiotic relationship that benefits both farmers and tourists. It involves activities such as farm stays, guided tours, hands-on agricultural experiences, and cultural activities. Kerala, with its diverse topography, lush greenery, and traditional agricultural practices, is well-suited for agritourism.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this article is to analyze the opportunities and challenges of agritourism in Kerala. The study aims to:

- Examine the current status of agritourism in Kerala.
- Explore the opportunities for growth and diversification in this sector.
- Identify the challenges hindering the development of agritourism.

- Propose strategic recommendations for the sustainable growth of agritourism in Kerala.

Review of Literature

"Agritourism" describes the activity of holidaymaking in rural areas, specifically for those seeking a rural experience. The activities can include wine tours, outdoor sports, participation in the rural lifestyle and the local community, enjoyment of the natural environment, and the opportunity to enjoy truly locally produced food. Agritourism forms a significant proportion of the tourism sector, and its growth is set to continue in both developed and developing countries. (Micha Sznajder, Lucyna Przezborska, 2009)

Agritourism is a subset of rural tourism that promotes the agricultural environment as a tourist attraction. Agritourism is characterized by activities that allow tourists to engage with farm life, thereby enhancing the rural experience. Studies have categorized Agritourism into five distinct types: direct sales, educational tourism, recreational activities, accommodation, and events (Phillip, 2010).

Agritourism in India has seen a steady rise, particularly in states like Maharashtra, Punjab, and Uttarakhand. However, Kerala, with its unique agricultural heritage, remains underexplored. A report by the Ministry of Tourism (2018) indicates growing interest in agritourism as part of India's sustainable tourism initiatives. Kerala's landscape, climate, and biodiversity provide an ideal setting for agritourism. The state's agricultural diversity includes tea, coffee, spices, and coconut plantations, along with paddy fields and traditional vegetable gardens. Initiatives like farm stays and spice tours have begun to attract niche tourists seeking immersive cultural experiences.

According to Aable, Mahesh, and Dighe, Aparna (2015), agritourism is the next generation of tourism products that are built on the local agrarian scenario. It primarily discusses the framework for rural farmers, the use of rural development, and the inventiveness of rural entrepreneurs. It requires a way for visitors to experience the many opportunities that come with farm tourism. Additionally, they pointed out that in the manufacturing or product industry, creativity may be readily measured by producing new basic model versions, updated products, or completely original designs. The study demonstrated the close relationship between technology and product inventiveness.

According to Aruljothi, C., and Ramaswamy, S. (2011), agritourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors in the world, creating new prospects for regional, social, cultural, and economic development. According to the research, tourism provides opportunities for local communities, tourists, and tourism service providers to build and improve infrastructure. International Agritourism helps to handle payment balance issues, generates foreign exchange, and fosters commercial, economic, and intercultural interactions.

According to Chandrashekhara Y (2018), Agritourism has a huge potential to provide a lot of jobs and extra revenue streams for both trained and unskilled workers. According to the study, even receiving a steady income from farming would not be enough to support oneself. The study further noted that the state and federal governments are working to create a long-term policy framework to bring about the required changes in the agricultural industry because someone who may be more skilled with the natural expertise of farming land must translate into a viable source of revenue.

Dileep M. R. (2006) evaluated Kerala's tourist development over the last 20 years and found that local and international tourist visits have dramatically grown. Additionally, the report revealed that the Department of Tourism is implementing some innovative marketing strategies. According to the study's findings, Kerala's product range has significantly expanded

Amit Kumar Dwivedi, and Dwivedi, Nivita (2011) conducted research to determine why Indian farmers and stakeholders want to take advantage of the company's agritourism entrepreneurship opportunities. The study discovered that, while entrepreneurship in the agritourism industry has yet to take root in rural or agricultural sections of India, it can be a valuable instrument for the improvement of rural areas in the country.

Priyanka Singh (2016) discovered that Agritourism is a sort of multifunctional farming that allows you to experience village life, enjoy authentic local cuisine, and learn about various farming vocations while you're there. According to the survey, many Indian farmers, notably those in Pune and Maharashtra, are either involved in or exploring Agri tourism as a strategy for diversifying their fields. The question is, how will they accomplish this? According to the study, the full potential of agritourism can only be fulfilled if steps to address and resolve its challenges are developed.

By the 21st century, Agritourism in India began to witness a notable rise in popularity. States like Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Himachal Pradesh have become hotspots for Agritourism, attracting both domestic and international tourists. Farmers have started to open their farms to visitors, offering experiences such as fruit-picking, handicraft workshops, and cooking classes that highlight local cuisine. The establishment of various Agritourism websites and platforms has also facilitated this growth, making it easier for travellers to book farm stays and experiences.

Agritourism has proved to be a boon for rural economies. It not only provides farmers with an additional income stream but also promotes local artisans and small-scale businesses. According to the Indian Tourism Statistics report published by the Ministry of Tourism, Agritourism contributed significantly to rural job

creation, aiding in reducing migration from rural to urban areas (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018).

Agritourism in Kerala can be traced back to the early 2000s when the government recognized the potential of combining agriculture with tourism. The state's rich agricultural heritage, characterized by the cultivation of spices, rubber, coconut, and rice, provided a unique opportunity for developing Agritourism. The Kerala Agricultural University and the Department of Tourism initiated various programs to promote Agritourism, aiming to enhance the economic viability of rural areas while preserving Kerala's agricultural identity

Opportunities of Agritourism in Kerala

Kerala, often referred to as “God’s Own Country,” is renowned for its lush landscapes, rich biodiversity, and extensive agricultural heritage. With its picturesque backwaters, rolling hills, and vibrant cultural tapestry, the state possesses unique opportunities to harness Agritourism as a powerful tool for economic development and rural empowerment. In Kerala, the potential for Agritourism is vast due to the state’s unique climatic conditions, fertile soil, and diverse cropping patterns (Luke, 2013).

The rubber plantations of Kottayam, the spice gardens of Wayanad, and the coir and coconut farms along the coastal regions present tourists with picturesque vistas and immersive agricultural experiences. One of the key opportunities in Agritourism is the promotion of local cultural heritage. Kerala’s farmers are integral to its cultural identity, and Agritourism can help document and showcase traditional farming practices, culinary arts, and local festivals. Tourists participating in harvesting, processing, and cooking traditional meals can gain a deeper appreciation for the agrarian lifestyle and cultural significance of local produce. This immersive experience not only enhances tourist satisfaction but also educates visitors about sustainable practices and the importance of preserving local ecosystems (Ghosh, 2015).

Moreover, Agritourism has the potential to uplift local economies. By creating direct financial links between farmers and tourists, Agritourism can help alleviate rural poverty. Farmers can diversify their incomes through farm stays, guided tours, and workshops that teach visitors about sustainable agriculture, organic farming, and traditional crafts. This diversification reduces reliance on crop sales and mitigates the economic uncertainties faced by farmers due to fluctuating market prices. The promotion of Agritourism could also catalyze the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. With increasing interest in organic farming and sustainable practices, Kerala’s Agritourism sector can encourage environmentally friendly methods among farmers. Visitors’ interest in eco-friendly practices can stimulate demand for organic produce, encouraging farmers to adopt sustainable farming methods that benefit both the environment and their livelihoods.

Additionally, the rise of eco-conscious travellers presents a modern opportunity for Agritourism in Kerala. As tourists become more intentional about supporting local and sustainable initiatives, Agritourism offers a compelling avenue for ethical travel. Kerala’s Agritourism can attract these travellers by highlighting unique local experiences, such as farm-to-table dining and workshops on traditional crafts, fostering a deeper connection with the local community. However, maximizing the potential of Agritourism in Kerala requires strategic planning and investment. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, local farmers, and tourism stakeholders are essential. Programs that provide training in hospitality, marketing, and sustainable practices can empower farmers to successfully engage in Agritourism. Infrastructure development, such as pathways to farms, signage, and promotion of local markets, can enhance the overall visitor experience (Rajendran & Ravi, 2018).

Major Agritourist Centers in Kerala

Wayanad

Wayanad, known for its pristine natural beauty, is home to several agritourist centers. The region is famous for its plantations of coffee, tea, and spices. Notable agritourist spots include:

- **Vythiri Resort:** This eco-friendly resort offers visitors a chance to engage in various farming activities. Tourists can partake in plantation tours and learn about organic farming practices.
- **Dew Drops Farm Resort:** Located amidst coffee plantations, this resort provides a unique opportunity for tourists to stay in a plantation setting and participate in farm activities.

Munnar

Munnar, a well-known hill station in Kerala, is famous for its tea plantations. Some agritourism centers in Munnar include:

- **Kannan Devan Hills Plantation Company:** Offers visitors the chance to visit tea gardens and learn about tea processing. The estate also provides boutique accommodations for an immersive experience.
- **Greenberg Ayurveda:** Focused not only on tea but also on wellness, this retreat combines agritourism with Ayurvedic treatments, attracting health-conscious tourists.

Idukki

Known for its spice plantations, Idukki offers unique agritourism experiences, including:

- **Pepper Trail:** Nestled in the Western Ghats, this eco-friendly resort is located in a former plantation. It offers educational tours about spice cultivation and sustainability practices.
- **Kalypto Holidays:** A tour operator that provides guided tours to organic farms, showcasing the rich biodiversity of the region.

Kumarakom

Situated on the banks of Vembanad Lake, Kumarakom is famous for its backwaters and paddy fields. Agritourism here focuses on local agriculture and traditional systems, highlighted by:

- **Coconut Lagoon:** This eco-resort offers visitors a blend of Agritourism with nature. Guests can explore local farming practices, especially coconut farming.
- **Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary:** While primarily a bird sanctuary, it also incorporates local agricultural practices, allowing tourists to appreciate the relationship between farming and wildlife conservation.

Prospects of Agritourism in Kerala

The prospects of Agritourism in Kerala are bright due to several factors:

1. **Cultural Heritage:** Kerala's rich agricultural heritage and diverse cultivation practices can be leveraged to attract tourists interested in authentic experiences. Visitors can learn traditional farming techniques, participation in festivals, and even cooking classes using local produce.
2. **Sustainable Practices:** As a state heavily focused on sustainability, Kerala can promote Agritourism as an avenue to educate tourists on organic farming, biodiversity, and conservation efforts. This aligns with global trends towards eco-conscious travel.
3. **Promotion of Local Produce:** Agritourism can create a market for local products, benefiting farmers by allowing them to sell organic produce directly to consumers. This cuts out intermediaries and provides a fair price for agricultural products.
4. **Government Support:** The Kerala government has been supportive of the Agritourism sector. By creating policies that promote rural tourism and providing incentives to farmers for developing agritourist centers, there is ample scope for growth in this sector.
5. **Rising Tourism Trends:** There is a growing trend among tourists seeking unique experiences rather than conventional holiday packages. Agritourism offers intimate, hands-on experiences that resonate well with modern travel preferences.

Challenges in Developing Agritourism in Kerala

Agritourism has emerged as a promising avenue for enhancing rural economies and promoting sustainable tourism in Kerala. However, the development of this sector is significantly hampered by two critical challenges: lack of awareness and inadequate infrastructure. Many stakeholders, including farmers and local communities, remain unaware of the potential benefits agritourism can offer. This knowledge gap prevents effective engagement and investment in agritourism initiatives. Without an understanding of how agritourism can provide alternative income sources and enhance community livelihoods, stakeholders may be reluctant to participate in or support such ventures (Rajendran & Ravi, 2018).

Moreover, the existing infrastructure in Kerala poses a substantial barrier to the growth of agritourism. Inadequate transportation facilities, limited access to essential services like water and sanitation, and insufficient marketing strategies hinder the development of attractive tourist destinations within agricultural settings. The lack of collaboration among various stakeholders further complicates these issues; without coordinated efforts from government bodies, local communities, and private investors, it becomes challenging to create a conducive environment for agritourism. Therefore, addressing these infrastructural deficiencies is crucial for unlocking the full potential of Agritourism in Kerala (Thomas, 2015).

Agritourism in Kerala presents significant opportunities for rural development, yet it is hindered by critical challenges, notably a lack of awareness and inadequate infrastructure. The potential benefits of agritourism, such as supplemental income for farmers and enhanced rural livelihoods, remain largely unrecognized among local stakeholders. Farmers may not fully understand how to leverage their agricultural assets for tourism purposes, while potential tourists are often unaware of the unique experiences Kerala's agrarian landscape can offer (Babu & Prakash, 2016).

Inadequate infrastructure further complicates the development of agritourism in the state. Essential facilities such as transportation, accommodation, and visitor amenities are often lacking. This deficiency not only deters tourists but also limits farmers' ability to market their offerings effectively. Improving infrastructure is crucial for making rural areas more accessible and appealing to visitors. Thus, addressing both awareness and infrastructural gaps is essential for unlocking the full potential of agritourism in Kerala.

Regulatory and Policy Issues

One of the primary issues is the overly centralized control exercised by state authorities, which limits the potential for private sector involvement in agritourism initiatives. Current policies primarily focus on state-run tourism services, neglecting local farmers and entrepreneurs who could contribute significantly to this sector. This centralization stifles innovation and reduces the incentives for alternative accommodations such as homestays and houseboats that could enhance the Agritourism experiences (Gunarekha & Binoy, 2017).

Another challenge lies in the inflated statistics often used by government bodies to promote tourism. These exaggerated claims can create unrealistic expectations among stakeholders regarding the benefits of Agritourism. The reliance on unreliable data not only misguides policy formulation but also discourages investment from both the public and private sectors. Without accurate assessments of potential impacts, effective strategies for developing agritourism cannot be established.

Furthermore, there is a lack of emphasis on community-driven development within existing policies. A more participatory approach would allow local communities to take an active role in shaping agritourism initiatives. Instead of acting solely as regulators, government agencies should facilitate collaboration between community members and tourism developers to ensure that local needs are met while maximizing economic benefits. By addressing these regulatory shortcomings through decentralized frameworks that empower local stakeholders, Kerala can unlock the full potential of its Agritourism sector (Babu & Prakash, 2016).

The regulatory framework for agritourism in Kerala is still evolving. Licensing requirements, land use regulations, and the lack of a cohesive policy on agritourism present significant obstacles. There is a need for streamlined policies that encourage farmers to participate in agritourism ventures.

Climate Vulnerability

Biodiversity is a critical aspect of Kerala's Agritourism appeal. The interplay of diverse flora and fauna draws tourists to the state's picturesque landscapes, serene backwaters, and lush green farms. However, climate change is contributing to the loss of biodiversity in Kerala. Rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have begun to affect local ecosystems, leading to altered habitats for many species. For example, the decline in the availability of specific crops due to climatic stress reduces the chances of visitors experiencing authentic agricultural practices, thereby diminishing the unique selling proposition of agritourism (Kumar, 2017).

The socio-economic landscape of Kerala is intricately linked to its Agritourism sector. The livelihoods of many rural communities depend on agritourism for economic stability. As climate change severely affects agricultural outputs, rural communities face financial constraints that limit their ability to sustain tourism-related activities. A report by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, highlights the economic interdependence between agriculture and tourism, showing that challenges in agriculture directly translate to challenges in tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2018).

The vulnerability of smallholder farmers in Kerala underscores this challenge. These farmers often lack adequate resources and information to effectively adapt to changing climatic conditions. Their limited adaptive capacity makes them particularly sensitive to the impacts of climate change, thereby affecting their ability to participate in agritourism initiatives. Moreover, socio-cognitive factors such as social support networks and cultural norms play a critical role in shaping farmers' responses to climate-related challenges. This complexity necessitates that agritourism development strategies incorporate an understanding of local perceptions and adaptive behaviours.

Furthermore, successful Agritourism development must prioritize micro-level planning that addresses water scarcity and promotes soil conservation practices. As climate variability continues to pose risks to agricultural productivity, integrating resilience-building measures into agritourism initiatives becomes imperative. By embracing sustainable practices that mitigate environmental impacts while enhancing local livelihoods, Kerala can foster a robust agritourism sector capable of weathering future climatic uncertainties. Kerala's agriculture is highly vulnerable to climate change, with increasing instances of floods and unpredictable monsoons affecting crop yields. This poses a risk to the sustainability of agritourism activities, as they are heavily dependent on stable agricultural production. Many farmers are hesitant to diversify into tourism due to a lack of skills, knowledge, and initial investment capital. Training and capacity-building programs are essential to help farmers understand the potential benefits and operational aspects of Agritourism (Dhananjayan, 2017).

Recommendations

1. Development of Infrastructure

Investments in rural infrastructure, including better road networks, signage, and accommodation facilities, are crucial for the growth of agritourism. Public-private partnerships can play a key role in financing these projects.

2. Policy Reforms

The government should introduce specific policies that streamline the process of establishing Agritourism enterprises. Clear guidelines on land use, licensing, and financial incentives would encourage more farmers to participate in the sector.

3. Capacity Building and Training

Organizing training programs for farmers and local tourism operators can help build the necessary skills for successful agritourism. Workshops on hospitality, marketing, and digital literacy would empower farmers to attract and manage tourists effectively.

4. Marketing and Promotion

A robust marketing strategy is essential to raise awareness about agritourism in Kerala. Digital platforms, social media, and collaboration with travel agencies can help promote agritourism products and experiences to both domestic and international tourists.

Conclusion

Tourism is one of the fastest-expanding sectors of the Kerala economy. Kerala's rural parts have a high unemployment rate. As a result, the tourism industry plays an important role in creating jobs. However, conventional/mass tourism, which is focused on tiny pockets, has significant limits in terms of job creation. So we must identify an alternate form of tourism, such as Agritourism. Today, Agritourism is an important component of global tourism. In these circumstances, Kerala offers a broader possibility for Agritourism in a variety of contexts.

Today most of the major tourist centers in Kerala are overcrowded. Tourists are generally more interested in Agritourism, which is eco-friendly, pollution-free, less crowded, and economically viable. So, if we implement Agritourism on a massive scale in Kerala, it will benefit the economy as a whole and it will also encourage the infrastructural development and employment in the rural areas. Although there are some programs implemented in connection with Agritourism, the Kerala Government has not yet identified the immense opportunities in the Agritourism sector. So, Government should take the necessary steps in the development of Agritourism in the State. The government should also make the required efforts to address important issues in this field, such as financing for Agritourism growth, coordinating several Agritourism facilities around the state, and conducting training and awareness campaigns among farmers in Kerala.

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