
Félix Zumbado-Morales
University of Costa Rica

Agrotourism and Agro-Ecotourism in Costa Rica

Agrotourism is a form of tourism that encourages visitors to experience rural culture as a tourist attraction. The term “agro-ecotourism” was used for the first time in Costa Rica in 1994, and it is generally used as synonym of agrotourism. Nonetheless, not all cases of agrotourism display sufficient concern for the environment to be considered agro-ecotourism. The aim of the present document is to examine the relationship between tourism and agriculture in Costa Rica by comparing the current use of the agro-ecotourism label with its theoretical foundations based on the analysis of 68 projects in Costa Rica. In all these projects, tourism activities were combined with agriculture. The study found that just a few of the evaluated projects are following the characteristics presented by the agro-ecotourism definition while suggesting the need to establish a system of certification to differentiate agro-ecotourism projects from other kinds of tourism businesses.

Keywords: Agrotourism, agro-ecotourism, Costa Rica, certification.

Félix Zumbado-Morales

Research Associate at ProDUS, University of Costa Rica

San Pedro, San José, Costa Rica, Phone: (506) 2283-4815, Fax: (506) 2283-4927

E-mail: fzumbado@produs.ucr.ac.cr / felzum@gmail.com

Zumbado-Morales, Félix holds a B.Sc. in Agronomy and a M.Sc. in Ecotourism. He is a research project coordinator at ProDUS (Research Program on Sustainable Urban Development), which is part of the University of Costa Rica. He has published several papers on tourism, rainwater collection, and agricultural/rural development.

Introduction

Costa Rica is internationally known as a tourism destination, with many natural resources including volcanoes, rivers, beaches, national parks and private reserves. Therefore, nature-based tourism is a main segment of the Costa Rican tourism industry. Additionally, more specialized tourism niches have emerged over the years (e.g., ecotourism, agritourism or agrotourism, agro-ecotourism, medical tourism, mass tourism, bird-watching tourism).

The management of a successful tourist destination intelligently develops tourist niches according to the marketing potential of a place. One of the expected benefits of a developing tourist niche is to provide increasing benefits to local economies. Niche tourism is also a mechanism for attracting high spending tourists as tourism projects use labeling to attract the attention of potential visitors. Notwithstanding, many of these projects use such labels as greenwashing.

In this context, this paper examines the relationship between tourism and agriculture in Costa Rica by comparing the current use of the agro-ecotourism label with its theoretical foundations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

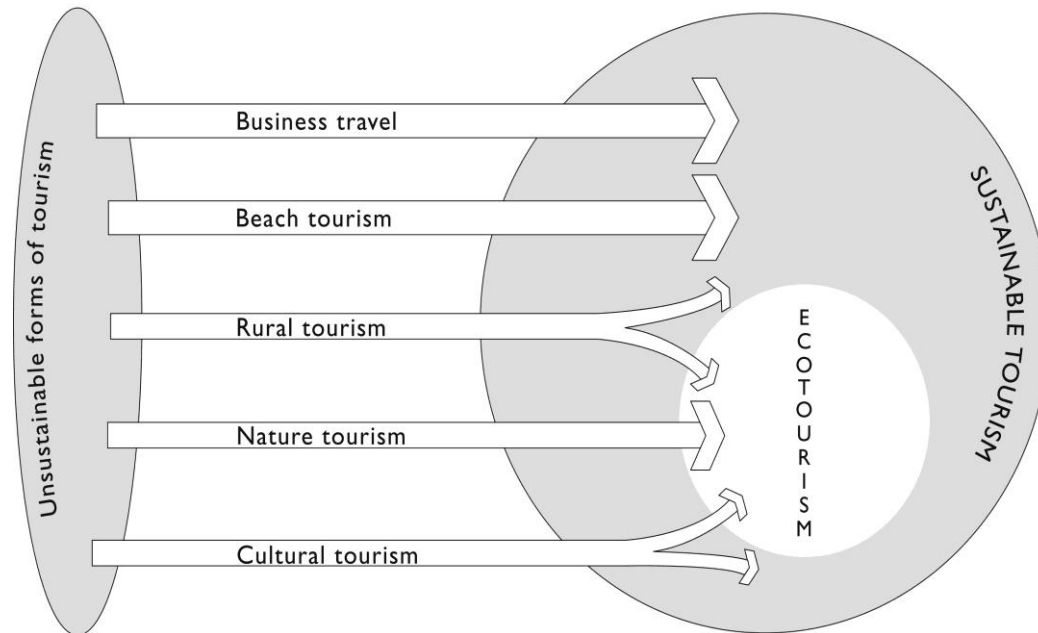
Because agro-ecotourism is a term derived from ecotourism and agrotourism, is important to start by describing the principles of both concepts. In the case of ecotourism, although the origin of the term is not entirely clear, the literature identifies five pillars or principles: tourism responsibility, minimization of environmental impacts, respect towards host cultures, maximization of benefits to local people, and maximization of tourist satisfaction (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996).

The formal definition of ecotourism has been generally credited to Ceballos-Lascurain, who in 1987 defined it as “traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery, wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas” (Blamey, 2001; pp. 5-6).

Ecotourism and the related concept of sustainable tourism are usually used as the same concept, however in this paper it is necessary to clarify the relationship between sustainable tourism and ecotourism. According to Cox et al. (2008, p. 6), the World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines sustainable tourism as tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future of the tourist sector. WTO has concluded that sustainable tourism guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations. Sustainable tourism, according to WTO, is based on sustainability principles, which refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of development. Sustainability implies that a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions.

Ecotourism is defined more narrowly than sustainable tourism, in that ecotourism is a subset of sustainable tourism and not all types of sustainable tourism can be considered ecotourism. Sustainable tourism, in general, requires that sustainable management practices are followed, and adherence to these practices is a common thread through both of these types of tourism.

Figure 1. Relationship between Ecotourism and sustainable tourism.



Source: Georgescu (2004).

In Costa Rica the Certification for Sustainable Tourism Program (CST) is led by the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT). The CST was designed to differentiate tourism businesses based on the degree to which they comply with a sustainable model of natural, cultural, and social resource management. The negative impacts of tourism development can gradually destroy the environmental resources on which it depends. Yet sustainable tourists can reduce the impact of tourism in many ways, including efficient use of water and energy, recycling and others.

Is also important to define agrotourism, many definitions exist regarding agrotourism, with several of them sharing similar key elements, but one of them stands out as more complete. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, 2004) has defined it as a form of tourism that capitalizes on rural culture as a tourist attraction; it is similar

to ecotourism, except that its primary appeal is not the natural landscape. Since the income from tourists contributes to improving the wellbeing of the local population, agrotourism can aid in local development efforts. To ensure that agrotourism also helps conserve biodiversity, the rural population itself have recognized agrobiodiversity as valuable asset worthy of protection.

In the case of the agro-ecotourism concept, it was used for first time in Costa Rica around 1994 when the Agrarian Development Institute (*Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario*, IDA) and the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT) signed an [agreement](#) to collaborate on a project to promote agrotourism as a possible solution for rural poverty issues. They coined this term for a form of tourism which combines the attractiveness of the agricultural sector with the environmental component of ecotourism (Zumbado, 2007). Thus, agro-ecotourism includes all the characteristics of ecotourism and agrotourism, as ecotourism is nature-based and agrotourism is farm-based. Agro-ecotourism is thus a combination of both.

A study by Monge (2005) summarizes the principal characteristics of agro-ecotourism, described as follows:

- It is agriculture-based, so the main motivation for travel is to share experiences with the farmer and the rural culture and landscape. The main activity of the visited businesses is agriculture while tourism is its secondary activity.
- Promotes understanding of the best agricultural practices.
- Encourages the conservation and regeneration of forests in the visited farm or nearby areas.
- Does not degrade the rural culture of the communities.
- Minimizes visitor impact on the natural and cultural environment.
- Provides competitive local employment in all aspects of business operation and management.
- The project is a contributor to the conservation of the main ecosystems in the region.

- Promotes the conservation and sustainable use of resources in both agriculture and tourism.

In Costa Rica, many projects use the agrotourism and the agro-ecotourism label interchangeably in the name of the project. However, very few of these projects put into practice the concepts of agro-ecotourism. The main objective of this research was to evaluate 68 projects to determine how many were congruent with the agro-ecotourism concept.

Methodology

An analysis of 68 Costa Rican tourism projects which mix agricultural production (be it plant production, animal husbandry or fishing) with tourism was conducted. The methodology for data collection was participant observation, qualitative interviews, and surveys.

The first step was the selection of tourism projects to be assessed. The projects were selected for the use of the word 'agrotourism' or 'agro-ecotourism' in the name of the project or its promotion in the databases of the Costa Rican Community-based Rural Tourism Association (ACTUAR), ICT, and the [Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture \(IICA\)](#). [This information was complemented with](#) Internet searches, tourist guides, promotional material, and consulting experts in the field (see Figure 2).

The second step was to create a series of indicators to evaluate the selected projects. This list of indicator was used to compare the evaluated projects with the theoretically-defined agro-ecotourism concept. The indicator list was created using the theoretical aspects of agro-ecotourism, in line with the agreement signed in 1994 by the Agrarian Development Institute (IDA) and the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT).

The variables measured in this research were: target market of the project, type of visitor (international or domestic), average visitation per month, tour operator alliance, type of ownership, tour prices, tour descriptions, geographic location, main project activity, and an evaluation of sustainability principles applied to the agricultural and touristic components of the project.

Indicators were evaluated for full or partial compliance. For example, if agriculture provided more than 50 % of the income for the project, then it was considered to have full compliance. If the percentage was less than the 50 %, the project was considered to have partial compliance of this aspect.

In the case of the best agricultural practices, a full compliance was obtained only when all the agricultural practices of the farm included sustainability principles, such as organic agriculture, soil and water conservation practices, biological control of pest and diseases, conservation agriculture, and others. Similar measurements were applied for the tourism components, such as human rights, environmental impact, community involvement, supplier relations, and others.

If the evaluated project provided monthly monetary donations for a conservation project or maintained a conservation area in the farm, then this project obtained a full compliance for the indicator of conservation. Occasional donations for conservation projects were considered as a partial compliance.

Finally, the collective benefits indicator is generally identified in the literature as one of the central objectives of sustainable tourism (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). The full compliance is obtained if the project provides benefits for the surrounding community.

Figure 2. Examples of agrotourism projects in Costa Rica.

Example of agrotourism initiatives in Costa Rica



COOPESARAPIQUI. Sarapiquí, Alajuela.
Coffee tour.



Isla Chira. Golfo de Nicoya.
Traditional fishing tour.



Danta Corcovado Lodge. La Palma, Golfito.
Palmito tour.



Santa Cruz de Turrialba.
Dairy tour.



Coopesanjuan. Aguas Sarcas, San Carlos.
Pineapple tour.



ASECAF. Paquera, Puntarenas.
Goat dairy tour.

Results and Discussion

The results obtained during this research is summarized in Table 1 and explained in detail in the following subsections.

Table 1. General characteristics of the evaluated projects.

Dimension	Variable	Number of projects (n=68)	Percentage of the total
Tourism supply	Provides a tour guide	68	100
	Provides accommodation	55	81
Main target group	International visitors	54	79
	Domestic visitors	14	21
Existence of agreements between projects and tour operator	Yes	7	10
	No	61	90
Visitation level	Low and occasional	61	90
	High and constant	7	10

Tourism supply

A common misunderstanding is that a tourism project always requires accommodations to function. The evidence shows that this is not true. According to Table 1, not all the projects include accommodations. In some cases, these businesses only offer a tour for a couple of hours.

Main target group

It is important to have a thorough understanding of the demand for existing products and services, so the tourist needs and preferences might be in accordance to future product supply. In this case the main target group of the projects is international visitors. Almost 80% of the visitors to the projects are foreigners.

Because Costa Rica is characterized by its strong agricultural tradition, most of the locals do not need to pay a tour to experience the rural lifestyle as they might have relatives that live in the countryside and therefore have visited their farms as a family vacation.

Relation with tour operator

In 90% of the cases the amount of visitors was low and occasional. Besides that, several project administrators do not take visitation statistics. It was noted that only the projects holding an agreement with a tour operator had a high and constant number of visitors.

The direct relationship between the existence of an agreement with a tour operator and a high and constant visitation is not surprising as strong links to markets are essential. Tour operator agreement is one of the ways for ensuring linkages to market demand.

Labels used in the evaluated projects:

It is important to have a sense of the number of businesses who currently use agro-ecotourism instead of just agrotourism or other labels in the name or publicity of their projects. Table 2 show the results of the analysis for this point. The main label used by the studied projects is agroturism, followed by rural community tourism (RCT). In third place the label agro-ecoturism was used by around 40 % of the evaluated projects.

Table 2. Labels used in the evaluated projects (n= 68).

Label used	Number of projects*
Agrotourism	51
Rural Community Tourism (RCT)	50
Agro-ecotourism	27

*Several projects used more than one label in the name or publicity of the businesses.

Table 3. Comparison between field observation and the concept of agro-ecotourism.

Variable	Number of projects (n=68)		
	Full compliance	Partial compliance	Non compliance
It is a locally-owned project	63	0	5
The source of income is agricultural activity	14	54	0
The farmers follow best agricultural practices	53	15	0
The project provides direct benefits for conservation	54	0	14
The project implements key principles of sustainable tourism development	4	3	61
The projects provides financial benefits and empowerment for all members of the local community	1	61	6

Locally-owned projects

While the results show that 93% of the evaluated projects are owned by locals, it is also important to point out that only 4% of the projects have been applying principles of sustainable tourism. Around 93% of the evaluated projects are community-owned and managed enterprises; and this is one of the defining characteristics of an agro-ecotourism project. Most

of the projects were funded by donors such as NGOs, which is one reason why some of these initiatives may have been ill-conceived from the onset. Some studies have pointed out that donor dependency is a common problem for community-based tourism projects (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). According with Goodwin and Santilli donor dependency is common in Community Based Tourism (CBT).

The main source of income for the project is agriculture

Agro-ecotourism is expected to allow the creation of an alternative source of income for farmers, but is not supposed to radically change rural lifestyle. In some projects, tourism is becoming more important than the agricultural component and this situation is changing the social structure of the community. In 54 projects (79 % of the studied projects), the tourism component, and not the agricultural is the activity that provides the main source of income for the business (50 % or more of the total income).

The farmers apply good agricultural practices in the project

As a part of the sustainability component in agricultural production the best agricultural practices show the relation between agriculture and environment. According with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2007), using the best agricultural practices, farmers can apply integrated crop management and integrated pest management to protect the environment. In this point, 57 of the evaluated projects work with good agricultural practices (GAP) in all their activities and 15 projects work according to the principles of GAP but not in the complete production cycle.

The projects provide direct benefits for conservation

For this control point 54 of the evaluated projects provide monetary donations for a conservation project every month or maintained a conservation area in the farm (full compliance).

The projects implement some of the basic principles of sustainable tourism development

Only the projects with a sustainability certification obtained a full compliance in this point. In this case just 4 projects work with the principles of sustainable tourism.

Communal benefits

Collective benefits for an entire community are generally identified in the literature as one of the central objectives of the sustainable tourism (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). Only in one exceptional case (CoopeSanJuan's Pineapple Tour, Aguas Zarcas, San Carlos) the entire community perceived the benefits of the project. In all the other cases, only a family or a group of families of the community perceived economical benefits. The evidence shows that it is not real to expect that one project provides benefits for all the community.

Conclusions and recommendations

The first conclusion of this research is that just a small number of the evaluated projects are following the characteristics presented by the agro-ecotourism definition. Nonetheless, such projects use the agro-ecotourism label in their branding and marketing regardless that they are not applying the principles of ecotourism in their activities. This is one main problem with the ecotourism label used in Costa Rica, as most of the so called "ecotourism" projects use the label "eco" as greenwashing in order to attract more visitors. Therefore, it is

strongly recommended that projects need to have a valid certification if they are to use labels like ecotourism and agro-ecotourism in their branding and marketing strategies.

Following these findings, we recommend that an agro-ecotourism certification guide/program needs to be created to ensure users that the tourism providers are working with a specific set of standards and indicators. In this case the standards or norms are the principles of the ecotourism applied to the agrotourism sector.

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