

AGRO-TOURISM IN AUSTRALIA

A POTENTIAL SUCCESS STORY

By
TOM CONNORS



ASIA-PACIFIC ASSOCIATION OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS
FAO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR ASIA & THE PACIFIC
BANGKOK

CONTENTS

Foreword

I. Background	1
II. The Rural Tourism	3
III. Socio-Economics Brings in Agro-Tourism	5
IV. Development of an Industry	8
V. Some Commercial Aspects	12
VI. The Extra-Commercial Aspects	16
VII. Some Host's Considerations	19
VIII. Trends in Favour	22
IX. The Clientele	24
X. Overseas Visitors	27
XI. Some Typical Agro-Tourist Farms of Australia	30
• A Splendid Sheep Farm	30
• Other Attractions in Remote Farms	31
• Nearby Farms in Rural Settings	33
• Tourists' Backgrounds and Liking	34
XII. Success Outweighs Statistics	36
XIII. Secrets of Success-in-Store	37
XIV. Epilogue	39
VII. Suggested Readings	41

FOREWORD

APAARI's presentation of success stories of member countries, based on texts developed by designated experts as per identification of merit of each case by the APAARI Executive so far, has been well received by all nationals and interest groups. Over a dozen of these success stories were transformed to a uniform, semi-popular, illustrious format by the Executive Secretariat before their publication. These covered wide ranging, commodity-specific to system-wide topics related to diverse geographies and agro-ecologies. A modest but firm effort was thus reflected on the part of APAARI in bringing some workable models to surface. These could be suitably adopted for similar situations by other members in the region and also by other regions.

The subjective treatment in the success stories published so far has ranged from the popularisation of improved varieties and technology in food and commercial crops on a country scale, well knit R&D and extension, socio-economic movements leading to the adoption of improved technology, export-oriented management of high value crops, and some successful, systematic, inter-departmental, governmental efforts leading to improved agricultural economy. Nevertheless, the objective of publishing these diverse case studies had a commonness, that is the 'real' success achieved so far was duly reflected for its possible repetition and adoption by other interested countries.

Agro-tourism in Australia is, however, an attempt to present a novel idea of potentials for success. An initial success is definitely achieved in this venture and more of it is implied in store. It is the love for nature, the countryside, and the attraction for a rural household setting in the backdrop, that could provide the potential/adventurous tourists from urban areas with ecstasies and fantasies. They would definitely love to follow suit once having visited and enjoyed such 'heavenly' sites for relaxing or adventure. The cut-short journey period due to the super sonic jet age coupled with reduced air fares would also attract as much tourists elsewhere in the region as in Australia. Use of Internet to attract tourists in the remote farm households is definitely a fantastic idea. It is synergistic for the farm host and the nature-loving tourist.

APAARI endorses the idea of the Author that this and other similar awareness attempts would provide positive options and opportunity to the Sydney bound tourist at the turn of the century to also visit several rural farming backdrops before as well as after the 2000 Olympic games. The association also wishes to promote this idea for the benefit of other nations in the region with the hope that a short recourse in the agro-backdrop could be soothing to the society hailing from hectic, industrialized and polluted cities.



(R.S. PARODA)
Executive Secretary

APAARI

NEW DELHI

15/11/97

BACKGROUND

A common saying is that 'Australia rode to prosperity on sheep's back' but for many farmers today wool prices are so low that they face difficulty in meeting their costs of production. Beef producers further suffer during years of low prices and drought. At the same time, wheat returns have remained volatile, depending upon the seasonal variations in the northern hemisphere. There is a long tradition of farmers seeking off-farm income during hard times which includes means such as farm labour in the neighbourhood or miscellaneous work in the nearest town. Now-a-days, such work is more difficult to find in Australia, with the average unemployment rate being around 8.5 percent and much higher in rural areas.



Depicting ecstatic vastness and prosperity on sheep's back

Agro-tourism, which has recently come into the fore in Australia, provides newer means of income generation. It includes farm stays or rural holidays and is found an excellent way to supplement farmers' income. The visitors, on their part, both tourists from Australia and overseas, enjoy a unique holiday experience in the farm country side. Agro-tourism has thus become an important part of the tourist industry in Australia due to its synergic effects, to both sides. The present story deals with this successful approach which may provide similar ideas to farming households and countries for its application *mutatis mutandis*.

THE RURAL TOURISM

Federal and state governments have been actively promoting rural tourism over the recent years. This included holiday travel outside the state capital cities and regional cities with population over 1,00,000. The National Rural Tourism Strategy of the Federal Government launched in the early 1990s included funding support to local authorities in improving/ promoting their tourist attractions. Promoting agro-tourism has been part of the strategy. A farm tourism section has been established in the Department of Agriculture by the



Enhancing the tourist attractions

Western Australian Government so as to develop/promote agro-tourism in the Australia's largest state. Although, a majority of rural tourists visit well known tourist spots/areas, such as, the Great Barrier Reef, Ayes Rock and Kakadu National Park, yet the interest in farm stays is also growing as part of rural holiday.

This growth in rural tourism may be attributed to several factors, such as,

higher education levels that increase the demand for leisure learning and inculcate interest in heritage,

- ii. greater disposable income,
- iii. advances in transport and communications that enable tourists to travel to all corners of the world including the once inaccessible areas, and
- iv. quest for peace and tranquility particularly by those living in industrialised societies.

SOCIO-ECONOMICS BRINGS IN AGRO TOURISM

Many Australian farmers are asset rich but income poor. Their properties are worth a lot of money but their annual income from agriculture is not always enough to maintain their farm operations and family lifestyle. Natural calamities like periods of drought, such as the one that recently ravaged much of eastern Australia, severely affected production and thereby financial hardships. Agro-tourism would provide the much needed additional income in several such cases.



An asset-rich rural setting



Maintaining fine homesteads is a challenge

The temptation to maintain the inherited, attractive farms and the fine homesteads over the generations but with the diminishing net profits has resulted in the establishment of agro-tourism industry by the owners of some of the finest properties. They attracted guests by several ways, including brochures outlining the beauty of their homestead, its antique furnishings, the luxury of the spare bedrooms and the old fashioned, spacious bathrooms. The brochures also contained histories of farms since the early days of European settlement in Australia.

The Australian farm population is low, being about four percent of the total population. This holds true in other developed nations too. Further, fewer farm hands are needed with the increased mechanisation and, over the recent years, farm management has been handled by the families themselves without employing outside labour so as to save the costs. In earlier years, virtually all sheep farms provided accommodation for shearers who were seasonally engaged every year to shear the flock. Horses provided the basic means of transport for the shearers. However, with the availability of good roads and faster transport they live in towns and drive daily to the shearing sheds.

The more prosperous farm households employed cooks, gardeners and governesses for the younger children. On the contrary, large wool and beef farms presently have just one family living in a large farm house with its spare rooms, cottages and shearing quarters empty. Such surplus accommodation could, however, provide a real alternative to farm-tourists for their stay in a hotel or rented seaside cottage.

Although many farmers entered agro-tourism to enhance their income yet others found it a remunerative way to diversify farm operations and become less market dependent. A regular holiday clientele provides sure earning with little wait and watch that would be faced at the cattle or wool auction. The trend to higher quality accommodation and service ensure client goodwill and more profits.

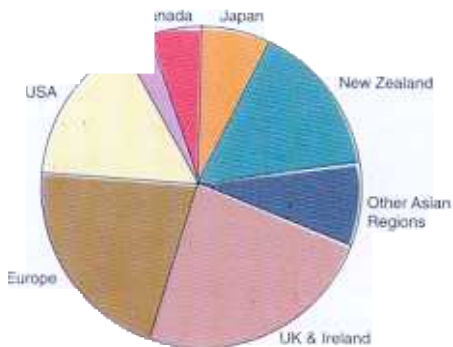
DEVELOPMENT OF AN INDUSTRY

The agro-tourism industry first came to prominence in the island state of Tasmania. Large farm areas granted to some of the free settlers in this state were developed with the help of free convict labour and the production in abundance of wool, meat and grain boosted the farm profits in the past. This resulted in some of the fine mansions that beautified the landscape and today accommodate the agro-tourists. In some ways, Tasmania has been compared to Britain. The weather is not as hot as on the Australian mainland, the grass is greener and many of the stately homes of Tasmania and Britain have been



*Overseas visitors to Australia 1990 :
proportion of total by country of origin*

Source: Bureau of Rural Tourism, Canberra, International Visitor Survey 1990



Overseas visitors to Australian rural areas 1990 : proportion of total visitors to rural areas by country of origin

opened up to paying visitors, to ensure finances for their upkeep. Further, with the changing nature of farm operation and need to economise on staff, several farms have been left with surplus accommodation that is clearly available for agro-tourism.

Agro-tourism as a subsidiary industry to farming got impetus with the assistance of Australian and overseas travel agents interested in bookings for farm stays. Further, some agro-tourism promoting organisations have also surfaced in various states of Australia. Farms offering accommodation along with their special attractions are included in the promotion lists of these organisations who help in popularising this venture. The agro-tourism organisations also provide free telephone booking and information services and they use domestic and overseas travel agents. The first farm holiday organisation, a Host Farms Association, was established in Victoria in 1977 and other states followed suit.

The Australian Farm and Country Tourism Association, a national level body was established in 1987. It aimed to represent farm hosts and hold conferences at the national level to promote the industry. Further, this organisation became an affiliate member of National Farmers' Federation in January 1995. The NFF has included among its objectives, the improvement of quality and standard of life and business in rural areas. This includes improved communication, such

as, a better and cheaper telephone service. Use of Internet has recently increased in promoting agro-tourism. Besides, displays at overseas tourism conventions provide promotion features related to Australian farm holidays as the way to see and enjoy 'real' Australia. Financial assistance through rural development grants of the government has further helped in development of agro-tourism industry.

Although all the Australian states have organisations representing farm tourism operators, yet several farmers run their businesses without their umbrella. Therefore, reliable estimates for the number of units operating in the agro-tourism are hardly available, mainly because the enterprise is scattered and sparse. The Australian Bureau of Statistics does not include holiday farms in its regular surveys of the tourism and hospitality. However, some random estimates may be used to present a gross idea of the agro-tourism industry in Australia. In 1993, the Australian Department of Tourism estimated around 1600 farms registered with various associations. However, the Australian Farm and Tourism Association estimated well over 2000 farms and believed that the numbers were steadily growing.

Current movement of international visitors into rural areas around Australia, seen from the regional figures from the International Visitors Survey (IVS), using particular definitions for areas and including or excluding from the definition of rural, has shown interesting trends (Table 1).

The primary purpose of domestic trips has remained fairly static in the past few years. In 1991-92, 41 per cent of domestic trips were primarily for pleasure or holiday, 29 per cent were for visiting friends and relatives, while 16 per cent were for business or conference travel.

Domestic visitors are more inclined than their international counterparts to spend time in rural areas of Australia. This is probably a reflection of the fact that most Australians live in the major cities and, for quality of life reasons, like to take the opportunity to get into the countryside. At the same time, the international visitors want to see the 'known' places and the popular spots which predominate in the cities.

Table 1: International visitors who visited rural areas per state and territory

State/Territory (Rural)	International visitors	Percentage of international visitors who visited rural areas by total international visitors by state/territory
New South Wales	297,894	16.6
Victoria	135,004	17.1
Queensland	201,251	14.2
South Australia	76,210	35.8
West Australia	99,917	26.9
Tasmania	36,865	49.6
Northern Territory	227,440	88.3
TOTAL	1,074,581	N/A

(Source: Bureau of Tourism, Rural Canberra, 1994)

The figures from the Bureau of Tourism Rural Canberra, Domestic Tourism Monitor, over the past seven years, have consistently shown that just over 60 per cent of trips have been to rural areas. The numbers are highest for holiday trips, with around 70 per cent being to rural areas, and lowest for business trips, where the percentage of trips to rural areas has been between 50 and 55 per cent. Whereas the number of visits to farms in recent years showed somewhat declining trend, the average duration of such individual visits has been on an increase which shows more satisfaction of the adventurous tourists to such areas.

SOME COMMERCIAL ASPECTS

Farms have been rated in Australia by the same organisations that rate hotels, motels and guest houses. These rating agencies assessed farm accommodation in the same manner that they applied to assess hotels. The comparisons were obviously unfair. However, due attention is now being paid to the fact that the agro-tourists enjoy peace of the Australian countryside as a welcome escape from television, telephones, faxes, daily newspapers, etc., type of usual things that would continue to dominate their daily lives in other modes of tourism. At



Rating farm accommodation in Australia is done by the same organisations that rate hotels

the same time, the assessment of tourist farms are subject, in some states, to regular updating. For example, the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria inspects tourist farms every two years and the ratings are published. This is vital in maintaining standards.



Self-contained cabins in a farm property



Cottages and sheep shearers' cabins attract low-budget tourists

Accommodation on farms ranges from high quality, to average standards. The gracious rooms in an historic mansion provide the comforts matching to a 5-star hotel and renovated sheep shearers' quarters are suitable for those on ordinary budget. Meals are served if needed or the agro-tourists could enjoy a fully self-contained holiday, arranging own food. Guest habits differ from those of the hotel stayers. Some guests prefer to relax by sleeping, reading and walking around, others get special enjoyment from helping out in farm activities, such as, sheep mustering, gathering eggs, putting out hay for livestock, and so on.

Visitors are also attracted due to special services at some farms such as horse riding, fishing in nearby streams, observing the native wildlife, such as kangaroos, emus and wombats. Night trips are arranged



Visitors prefer agro-tourism due to special attractions for their children



Horse riding provides an added attraction to agro-tourists

with spotlights, to observe the nocturnal creatures such as wombats, possums, owls, etc., which add to the attraction. Agro-tourists could be enchanted to see animals and birds in the wild, something that a city zoo can never replicate.

THE EXTRA-COMMERCIAL ASPECTS

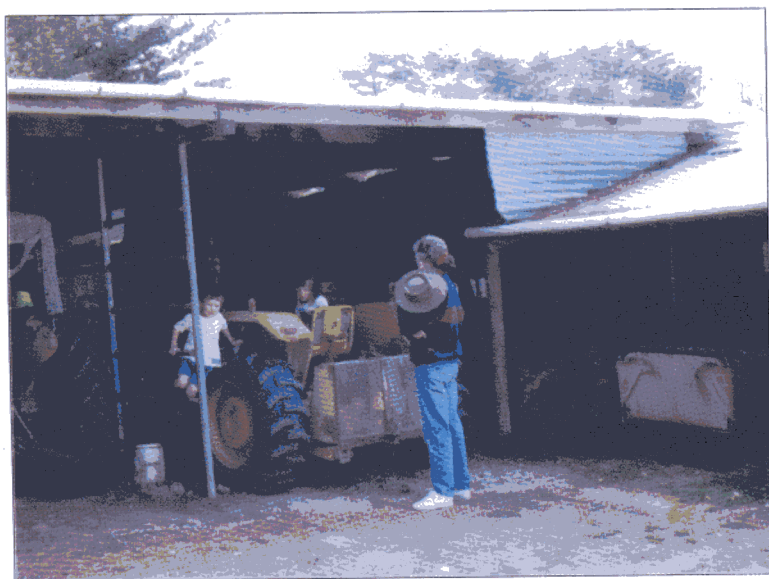
Besides holidaying, the agro-tourism encompasses education and training. Increased use of farms as education tools has been envisaged through catering for groups of school children and undergraduates either as day visitors or overnight guests. Such visits to working farms included the familiarisation with a homestead, a shearing shed, the machinery sheds and other areas of interest. Demonstrations would be arranged for sheep shearing, daily milking routine of the cattle or understanding the milk chain; from cow through the processing plant



Demonstrating sheep shearing

to the dinner table, as milk, butter, cream or cheese. Some farm hosts would provide fact sheets for students, and also take them off the farm to witness stock auctions and inspect wool stores and processing plants. In a way, the gap in perception for the urban and rural ways of life on the part of visiting school children as well as adults is minimized with such farm visits.

The agro-tourism has more potentials to express cordiality and friendship with nature, including the human behaviour. The visitor could be given a feeling of a friend in the farm family rather than a paying customer. A well guided tourist to the farm property, viewing thousands of sheep and the cattle as well as the native wildlife, mainly the large mobs of kangaroos, would be impressed quite a lot. At the same time, it could be interesting to note that the sheep and cattle were kept out of some areas where native trees were being planted in an effort to entice more wildlife back to the farm habitat! The farms that accommodate just a few people at a time find it easier to make their guests feel at home. On the other hand, those farmers who decide



Familiarising with a farm machinery shed



City-dwelling parents want their children to discover rural heritage

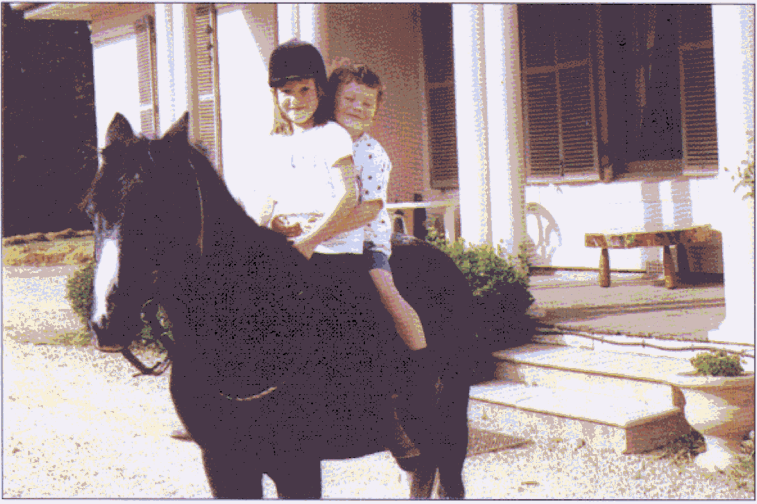
to extend their operations by erecting commercial type units can end up feeling that they are running a motel with too little time for their guests, the farm or even the family.

SOME HOST'S CONSIDERATIONS

To enterprise both in farm operations and hospitality is not an easy task. Many Australian farmers have had to learn the hard way. It would be wise to find out as to what the potential guests would like to do and how they would spend their time during their farm holidays. Then, the farming household has to plan their own farming schedule in such a way that sufficient time is assured at the disposal of the hosts to attend to the visitors. A well attended visitor shall be taken by the hospitality and would find the holiday better enjoyed than imagined.



Well attended visitors are taken by hospitality



Inventing ways to attract urbanites to rural settings

This often happens when the hosts could go out of their way to ensure that guests were well received, just as part of their family. Inviting the elder members to help with the farm work and the visiting children to sample a lifestyle very different from their own in the city could be very enjoyable and rewarding too. Often, the children were found



Sampling a very different lifestyle from their own city home



Long walks on sheep trails attract agro-tourists

the most reluctant to return home, urging their parents to stay back or repeat the holiday in future since they would find no lambs to cuddle, chickens to feed or ponies to ride in the city.

A friendly and tolerant attitude is required to be a successful farm host. If the host feels that the visitors are getting in the way of farm operations then both sides of his business are likely to suffer. It is advisable not to open farm household to agro-tourists if the family cannot afford to distribute time for both enterprises. Also intolerance to people because of their race, colour, politics, religion or lifestyle shall be detrimental to agro-tourism industry. An intelligent farmer would be socially interactive with the visitors from other countries or with different occupations. Despite the advent of modern communication networks, such as, the television and the Internet, many farmers are too involved in their own work to learn a lot about the outside world. Agro-tourism helps in breaking down the barriers to understanding and to find how other people live. This promotes greater tolerance for those different from oneself and enhances regional and international brotherhood.

TRENDS IN FAVOUR

Agro-tourism in Australia is capitalising on the recently changing trends in holidaying. With the increased pace of modern living many people are dispensing with annual holidays and substituting short breaks of a weekend or several days. The farms that are situated at few hours drive from a major city are more attracted by such visitors because of reduced period and fatigue from journey and bulk of the holiday period being available for relaxing. A person can knock off work at 5 p.m. on a Friday night and arrive on the nearby farm, well in time, for dinner. After two days of relaxation he/she can be back home on Sunday evening. Some people would love to do this several times a year, especially on long weekends where they have three or four days off work. The short break is expected to become more popular in Australia as this suits both the visitors and the farm host who, after attending to guests on weekends, can devote the rest of the week solely to farm activities.

Some farms are used by guests purely as places for restful accommodation as they pursue their hobbies around these farms. For example, farms near the snow fields are often used by skiers in winter and by trout anglers and hikers in summer. Similarly, some other farms close to the coast could be favoured by surfers and salt water anglers. In all such cases, the farms with their tranquil atmosphere and friendly hosts are preferred to hotels and motels. Regular visits by same tourists are, therefore, assured at the same farm each season who would be



A restful accommodation and a vastness to pursue some hobbies

quite anxious to resume their hobby along with friendship with the hosts.

Barring crocodiles which may be encountered in the far north of the nation, Australia does not have predatory animals, such as tigers or bears, to concern tourists in the outback. At the same time, Australia is a warm country of vast open spaces and its attractiveness to people living in cooler and crowded environments is increasing. Farmers see the overseas market as offering the best growth prospects. The agro-tourism in Australia has relied heavily on appreciation made by contented guests who, while returning to their own countries have been telling their friends about the farm stay that they enjoyed. The formal advertisement, nevertheless, is also on an increase.

THE CLIENTELE

Particular type of people or sections of society are more attracted towards agro-tourism than others. Business promotion in this field could be highly directed at families keen to show their children the country life, business people who want a momentary change from their hectic routine, the rat race, city people with a love of horse riding, bush walking, trout fishing, etc., and the urban overseas tourists who want to get away from the usual city sights to experience the 'real' Australia.



Out with a love for horse riding

It is no wonder that city families responded to the growing industry of agro-tourism in a big way. A farm holiday definitely provides unique experience and rural education to children, an education which would be had on a farm just by observing nature. It is definitely not available in a classroom.

Many city dwelling parents with their roots in rural Australia want their children to discover their rural heritage. There have been examples of city children believing that the milk they pour on their breakfast cereal from a carton actually originated in a factory and not in a cow! They did not realise that pasta is made from wheat. They have never seen a sheepdog rounding up a flock for shearing, cattle being branded, cows being milked or grain being harvested. Many would not have seen a kangaroo or emu in the wild or inhaled the smog-free air of outback Australia. They have never swum in an unpolluted creek, ridden a pony, watched a sheep being shorn or cuddled a baby lamb!

Similarly, a farm provides a perfect holiday spot for business people as the bedrooms are without telephones, fax machines and computer terminals and they will not be bothered by business associates. It is far satisfying and relaxing to enjoy the company of farm family discussing topics other than business.

Seeking a farm holiday purely for the joy of riding horses could be unique to certain people of such taste; and it is definitely far satisfying in the countryside rather than in polo grounds. Farm houses could easily arrange horses on request. For the less adventuresome visitors, there could be full-day/half-day trail rides whereas for the inexperienced riders tuitions for training could also be arranged. Australians have been brought up on legends about great horsemen and agro-tourism gives them the opportunity to live out their fantasies about life in the saddle.

There are few better ways of getting closer to nature than staying on a farm. Visitors could be startled by the wide variety of birds such as, beautiful parrots, the laughing kookaburra, wedge-tailed eagles,

bush canaries, etc., which are never seen around in the city. Most Australians would have seen a kangaroo but not in large mobs that could be more frequently spotted in the countryside. Nor could most visitors have seen emus in the wild; wombats or possums that come out after dark, some very close to the homestead! The fear from snake could be imminent. Yet, many guests would get a thrill at seeing a snake in the wild, especially from a reasonable distance. The nature lovers also visit a farm for the trees, creeks and wildlife and spend much of their time just walking.

OVERSEAS VISITORS

The Department of Tourism estimates showed that overseas visitors to Australia enhanced by more than three times over a decade and reached 3 million in the year 1993. Further, the Bureau of Tourism Research estimated these figures to surge to 4.8 million by the year 2000. The staging of the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000 is sure to boost the number of visitors during that year but the publicity about Australia generated by the games is further expected to maintain an increased number over a period of time. However, the present statistics does not provide a comfortable position of agro-tourism in the business market.

About 25 per cent of farm guests come from overseas. Japanese, Americans, particularly from the United States, and Europeans constitute the traditional visitors to Australia. However, visitors from the East Asian countries are also increasing in number, on farms. The cost of air fares has fallen dramatically over the years; it cost a Japanese tourist around \$A8000 for a five day holiday in Australia only a few years back but the present cost has come down to about \$A2000. Besides the fares, the time taken for the flight has also been shortened by the faster, longer range aircraft. A rise in interest by the Asians is likely to enhance promotion of agro-tourism in Australia. Most Asians living in urban areas with limited access to rural environment like to seek a holiday which would offer peace and quietness. In addition, they often seek a learning experience on overseas vacations.

Currently, most rural visits comprise day tours to a farm with only about five per cent of Asian visitors staying overnight. A lack of foreign language skills among hosts could be a limiting factor that needs to be appreciated to generate appropriate measures for the promotion of agro-tourism. Similarly, the farmers and others engaged in the agro-tourism industry need to be aware of the liking and preferences of specific nationals.



Befriending with farm animals is liked by all nationals

For example, the Japanese, are believed to be interested in seeing as much as possible in a relaxed atmosphere. An escape from stress into an unpolluted environment is important to them. They liked to see animals, particularly kangaroos and koala bears. Farm holiday operators have found that while the Japanese liked to experience the open spaces, they are generally unused to them. They were also wary of walking in the bush. It is unwise to plan anything too adventurous for Japanese guests and the hosts must be aware that their tourists hail from a small country dominated by large cities and their experience of a country as large and as sparsely populated as Australia could be a little daunting.

Japanese tourists usually travel in groups with itineraries set around some major cities. However, it was observed that small groups of Japanese liked agro-tourism, for the clear and brilliant starry nights of the Australian bush. Farmers are hoping that the numbers of Japanese agro-tourists to Australia may increase but realistically they are not expected to visit farms located far away from the cities. The farm households close to city, with plenty of pet animals that will provide photo opportunities, hold good chances for promotion of agro-tourism. Although these visitors may not be attracted to Australian-style food yet they were observed to enjoy barbecued steaks and roast lamb, a dish virtually unknown to them back home.

The Americans see themselves closely akin to Australians. The Australia and the United States have similar farming structures with properties much larger than in most other countries and with livestock raising being a dominant industry. Many American guests on Australian farms love to help in the farming operations, frequently making comparisons with how things are done back home. Some American tourists would be farmers themselves, others knowing something about the farming, in sharp contrast to the Japanese who have little exposure to agriculture as an industry. The travellers from rural America have been found to express a keen desire to visit an Australian farm. Sharing the same language as the Australians, they enjoy travelling the countryside and meeting the rural people. The warm climate provides them with good opportunity to enjoy the natural environment.

Among the Europeans, the Germans, the French and the British have shown interest and preference for undergoing rural holidays in Australia. Some appreciate the fact that there are feral pigs and goats to hunt. Some farms, well away from the cities and towns, have particularly attracted German tourists.

SOME TYPICAL AGRO-TOURIST FARMS OF AUSTRALIA

A Splendid Sheep Farm

Situated at a two hours' drive from Sydney and 10 kilometers from the regional city of Goulburn on the southern table lands of New South Wales is a 1000-hectares of gently undulating pasture with a sprinkling of red gum and box trees. Inside a boundary of around 15 Kilometers, there is about 40 km of internal fencing and nearly 6 km of laneways that ease the movement of sheep and cattle from one field to another.



Biodiversity in sheep being explained to agrotourists

The number of sheep run on such a typical farm varies according to the season and the condition of the pastures; About 7000 sheep are run in a good season. Oats are grown to supplement feed during winter when it is too cold for grass to grow. Besides, some 100 heads of cattle are also maintained; the main cattle breeds being Hereford and Poll Hereford.

Wool is the principal source of farm income; each year 125-150 bales, each of 195 kg, of mainly Merino wool are harvested for export. A small flock of black and coloured sheep is also maintained to produce wool for the craft and rug trades. Besides, fat lambs for meat trade are produced from crossing Merino ewes with Border Leicester rams. Two shearings are done in a year; one in July to shear the ewes that lamb in September and the other, main shearing in October/November. Three shearers shear up to 520 sheep a day and the shearing takes three to four weeks, working eight hours a day. Obviously, this would provide a particular attraction to the agro-tourists.

Other Attractions in Remote Farms

Holiday farms, considerably larger than the above, with more of land and accommodation and also many other smaller ones having a capacity to accommodate only a few guests at a time are now available in Australia. Among the other particular attractions to tourists at some of these agro-tourist farms could be the visit to nearby wineries, bush walk, hang-glide or other sporting activities, centuries old stone homesteads surrounded by old and big trees and ornamental lake(s), fine country cooking, wood working classes, domesticated farm animals, horse riding with guided rides through forests of eucalyptus trees, camel riding, catching yabbies, edible freshwater crayfish in the farm dam and creeks, etc.

One of the most unusual tourist farms is in Western Australia, also known as 'Farm-A-Llama'. On this tourist farm site, the major attraction is llamas. The tourists may load llamas with picnic hampers and walk with these gentle animals into nearby Darling Ranges.



Sheep shearing is done twice a year



Sharing some moments of natural attraction

The development of a network of rural air services has made some remote farms with unique attractions much more accessible to tourists. For the agro-tourists seeking real isolation, there are many properties remote from the urban areas in all mainland states, except Victoria, and in the Northern Territory.

Nearby Farms in Rural Settings

In contrast to the geographically isolated distant farms, some other agro-tourist attraction sites located as near as only a 15 minute drive from Canberra, the capital of Australia, provide facilities such as a horse stud set in 150-200 hectares of bush land besides a heated swimming pool, golf and tennis. Along with ample accommodation such farms have developed conference centres that specifically attract groups who love to meet in a rural setting rather than in a city hotel.



Nearby farms may attract urbanites in more than one way

Whereas accommodation on some farms is limited, this is not always the case. For example, one farm provides two self-contained units each of two bedrooms, bunkhouses with 4-8 separate bedrooms besides a camping area. Apart from holidaying guests, many day trippers including bus loads of school children and retired people, who belong to clubs that organise country tours, could be entertained on such properties.

Tourists' Backgrounds and Liking

It would be interesting to observe that agro-tourists from different countries showed considerable age differences. The travelers from the United States, Canada and Japan were older in general whereas those from Asia (excluding Japan) and European countries were relatively younger. For example, 67 percent of rural travelers from the US were observed to be aged between 35 and 68 years whereas the corresponding figure for Indonesia was only 28 per cent. Further, three quarters of Japanese, two thirds of North American and one third of Indonesian travelers were married or in *de facto* relationships. Travelers from other countries were more often single than married. Among the 15 different tourist nationals surveyed, 40 per cent of rural travelers were found to have tertiary education. The number of student travelers was also high, being 40 per cent from Indonesia, 22 per cent from Korea, 18 per cent from Thailand and 18 per cent from Italy.

The rural tourists desired to see unspoilt scenery, natural wonders, great beaches and wide open spaces and to seek new experiences that were both exciting and safe. They had a lust to experience the local



Cosyness of indoors is as important as the vastness of the surroundings



Cattle lakes and wilderness region, Victoria

culture. They were also budget conscious, a factor which could add to the attraction of farm stays with accommodation costs generally well below that of city hotels.

The tourists from Asian counties such as Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Taiwan expressed that the basic reason to seek rural holidays was that they wished to escape the stress of daily life back home. They wanted to get away from traffic, crowded walkways, noise and pollution. The specific 'Australian' type of experiences they would love to enjoy were the visit to sheep stations, ancient Aboriginal sites, wildlife parks and eating Australian-style food.

SUCCESS OUTWEIGHS STATISTICS

The rural and eco-tourism have been forecasted to be among the Australia's fastest growing industries over the next decade. The actual figures in terms of numbers and growth in agro-tourism are difficult to gather. One gets confused among the numbers available for agro-tourists, rural tourists and tourists in Australia. There is no escape from statistical overlapping of these figures and the masking of agro-tourism by the rural tourism. Nevertheless, a unique 'agro' experience can not be possible in towns and villages which are claimed to be 'rural'. There are places which are advertised as 'farms' in order to attract agro-tourists but such 'farms' do not charm them since little or no farming activity is undertaken there. Hence, the agro-tourism has to be enjoyed, advertised and popularised because of its own distinctiveness. Australia has definitely shown the way! Let it flourish there and other places in the region follow suit.

SECRETS OF SUCCESS-IN-STORE

There are several reasons, as given below, which favour the idea that the agro-tourism has better future and synergies,

- i. Quest for peace/tranquility, love for nature and faster communication means render Australian countryside as explorers' paradise.
- ii. Vast natural expanse is studded with fine, hereditary homesteads which have become partly unused due to significant reduction in seasonal farm labour. Such property is now open to agro-tourists.
- iii. There are several advantages of staying in farm houses as against hotels/motels. These include economic savings, exposure to rural social and cultural backgrounds, learning with own experiences at farm work, countryside and with wildlife.
- iv. Rural farm settings are educative and have good potentials to educate children about rural life.
- v. National level organisations and regular tourism industry have taken charge of promoting agro-tourism through Internet and other advertisement modes.



*Australian countryside would be as interesting as the Sydney Olympics
before and after the games*

- vi. Overseas visitors are likely to visit *en masse* during Sydney Olympics in 2000 A.D. A well advertised tourism campaign in favour of agro-tourism is sure to have persistent favourable impact.

EPILOGUE

There is no doubt that with the expansion of agro-tourism under the impetus of rising income and lower air fares, this enterprise could attain the status of a promising industry in due course. Australia's popularity as a tourist destination is surely to be boosted with the publicity generated by the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Further, with the development of faster, longer range aircraft, more tourists are expected to be attracted for Australia, as a place suitable enough to relieve their stress, due to its wide open spaces, natural wonders and exotic animals.



Trends in favour of increased agro-tourism are being predicted in Australia

The future of agro-tourism industry, therefore, appears to be bright if effectively promoted both by government agencies and the industry itself. The agro-tourism has become a vital part of Australian agriculture albeit with limited farm households. With care and common sense, more farmers can combine farming with tourism. The two industries can live under the same roof as long as the farmer remembers two jobs, both of which can be demanding.

The farm-stays constitute part of the new boom in eco-tourism which did not impact on the environment *per se* but benefited a lot of people in and around the farms, not only the farmers but also the local communities. Agrotourism would, therefore, help in harmonising rural cultural environment.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Rural Tourism : Tourism Discussion Paper No.1. Commonwealth Department of Tourism, Canberra 1993.
- National Rural Tourism Strategy. Commonwealth Department of Tourism Canberra, December 1994.
- Marketing Advice on Developing the Rural Tourism Market: Rural Travelers to Australia, Summary. Australian Tourist Commission, Sydney, March 1995.
- AFACT News: Newsletter of the Australian Farm and Country Tourism Newsletter, Melbourne, various editions.
- Newsletter of the New South Wales Farm and Country Holidays Association Inc. Sydney, various editions.
- Farms and Station Stay. Newsletter of the Farm and Country holidays Association of Western Australia, Perth July. 1995 edition.
- Philip Sykes. Address on Farm Tourism to the New South Wales Farmers' Association Region 11 Conference, Canberra, May 1 1997.
- John Sharp, Australian Minister for Transport and Regional Development. Address to the 1995 Conference of the New South Wales Farm and Country Holiday Association. Goolabri Park, NSW, August 9, 1995.
- Bureau of Rural Tourism, Canberra. International Visitor Survey, 1990-1994.