# Agritourism as a Form of Free Time Activity Among Families with Kids in Poland

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#### Abstract:

**Purpose:** The purpose of the article is to show agritourism as a form of free time activity for families. Several research problems were adopted in the study. These include, which elements of the village and agriculture are rural tourism potential? what locations are preferred by tourists? what are the reasons for choosing agritourism as a way of spending free time, and what influences the choice of a specific facility? what forms of spending time during the stay in the countryside were chosen by tourists and what activities did the respondents most often take with their children?

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study involved a literature review and a diagnostic survey based on a questionnaire. The survey was disseminated in 2019 through social media - Facebook. The sample included 234 people who recently rested on an agritourism farm with children under 14 years old.

**Findings:** The respondents preferred several shorter breaks to one longer farm stay. The most appealing locations of agritourism farms included destinations near a lake or river, the mountains or the sea. Recreation in the countryside was valued by the respondents mainly due to the tranquillity of the farmland atmosphere and health benefits of rural areas. The choice of a particular farm was mostly determined by the price, as well as the distance and convenience of getting there. The most enjoyed recreational physical activities undertaken in the country included hiking and cycling. The responders were pleased with their vacation on an agritourism farm.

**Practical Implications:** The presented results can be an inspiration and a valuable hint for farm owners who are considering or are at the stage of creating / modifying an agritourism farm aimed at servicing families with children.

**Originality/value:** The presented issues are rarely undertaken in research. Existing studies were general and not very detailed or were undertaken on a small research sample.

Keywords: Agritourism, families with kids, free time, Poland.

JEL classification: Z32, O18.

Paper Type: Research article.

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## 1. Introduction

The rural areas and agriculture are no longer solely perceived through the idea of food production. Nowadays, they fulfil many functions, including social, cultural, environmental and recreational functions. This is the consequence of the implementation of the idea of multifunctional development of rural areas and agriculture. Many scientific studies have been conducted in this field both in the European and non-European countries. Their authors are, among others, Kłodziński (1993; 1996), Skawińska (1994), Wilkin (1999), Paarlberg *et al.* (2002), Peterson *et al.* (2002), Vatn (2002), Van Huylenbroeck *et al.* (2007), Van Acker (2008), Leakey (2017).

In Poland and other European countries, rural tourism and agritourism are treated as important elements of multifunctional development. These forms of tourism are currently assigned numerous crucial roles and functions in the rural economy, which are a source of various benefits for local tourism service contractors and the entire community. The significance of this development and multi-faceted benefits generated by the tourism function of rural areas have inspired many scientific studies. Their authors are, among others, Gannon (1994), Greffe (1994), Sikora (2000), Majewski and Lane (2003), Wicks and Merrett (2003), Hall (2004), Sonnino (2004), Brscic (2006), Schilling *et al.* (2012), Zawadka (2013; 2014), Balińska (2012; 2016).

It should also be noted that agritourism, just like any other form of tourism, has various functions and offers numerous profits for visitors, especially families with children. The benefits can have a recreational, pro-health and educational character. A vacation on an agritourism farm gives an excellent chance to broaden one's knowledge about agricultural production and farm animals, raise ecological awareness, as well as receive cultural education, including learning about interesting local customs still cultivated in many regions. It is also an opportunity to enjoy tasty, healthy regional cuisine and to review the way of thinking about the country and agriculture, possibly changing stereotypical and pejorative views about them. Quiet and tranquil rural areas, far from the hustle and bustle of city life, create a place where families with children can relax in a safe and stress-free way.

## 2. Research Methodology

The purpose of the article is to show agritourism as a form of free time activity for families. Several research problems have been addressed in the study, including: Which elements of the countryside and agriculture contribute to the tourism potential of rural areas? What locations are preferred by tourists? What are the reasons for choosing agritourism as a form of free time activity, and what influences the choice of a specific farm? What forms of spending time during the stay in the countryside were chosen by tourists and what actions did the respondents most willingly undertake together with their children?

The research study involved a literature review and a diagnostic survey based on a questionnaire, which was posted on social media (Facebook) in 2019. The statistical analysis was conducted on the sample of responses posted by responders who stayed on an agritourism farm with at least one kid aged less than 14 once or more. The sample involved 234 people.

For the purpose of this research, it had been assumed that agritourism is a form of rural tourism strictly connected to a working farm. A similar definition has been provided by Oppermann (1996), Sharpley and Sharpley (1997), Roberts and Hall (2001), McGehee (2007), Ollenburg and Buckley (2007), Barbieri and Mshenga (2009), or Balińska *et al.* (2008). It should be noted, however, that the existing research in this field, (not only Polish), show rather inconsistent use of the terms, tourism in rural areas, rural tourism and agritourism. Being aware of this fact, in this study we only took into account the experience of the respondents who used agritourism services that meet the cited definition.

## 3. Characteristics of Respondents

The majority of 234 respondents were female (69.2%). The age of the responders was diverse, but, according to the nature of the sample (parents of children under 14 years of age), the group was dominated by people between 30 and 50 years of age (80.3%). The respondents were well educated - 62.8% completed tertiary education and 29.1% - secondary education. The level of education was related to the respondents' occupation - almost 60% of the respondents were white-collar workers (including freelancers and managers).

The responders defined their own financial status in a positive way - 56.8% of them named it as 'rather good', 17.5% as 'very good' and 22.2% as 'sufficient'. The responders mostly lived in cities: 41.0% in large ones (more than 200,000 inhabitants), 19.7% in towns from 50 to 200 thousand citizens and 22.6% in smaller ones. Only 16.7% of respondents lived in the country. The respondents most often had two children (46.2%), while those with single child accounted for 35.1% and with three kids for 17.1%. Only 1.3% of respondents had 4 or more children. It is worth emphasizing that the obtained results are in many areas convergent with international studies on the characteristics of people taking farm-based holidays. Blekesaune et al. (2010) provided a broad review of research in this area, using the results of studies conducted in the USA, Canada, Israel, Germany and Norway. They argue that agritourism farm visitors in all these countries share similar characteristics – they are middle-aged people (30-50 years), more often women, well-educated, with a medium high income, recreating in rural areas with children.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Only 35.9% of respondents declared that agritourism is a well-known and mass form of recreation in Poland. 41.9% of responders did not agree with this statement and the

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others (22.2%) had no opinion. Cause for the rather little popularity of agritourism and rural tourism in Poland, among others, may be the stereotypical perception of the country and the misconception that rural tourism is not attractive. Such situation probably will not change soon due to the notoriously inefficient promotion of agritourism.

Solutions in this area have been mainly implemented by the Rural Tourism Consortium 'Rest in the Countryside' created in 2015 involving Polish Rural Tourism Federation, Polish Tourism Organization, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and Ministry of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Poland. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of these efforts is insufficient.

The majority of respondents (49.1%) took farm-based vacations two times a year, 30.8% of responders usually took single countryside holiday, and 16.2% had three breaks. The rest recreated in the country four or more times a year. The responders choose relatively short stays: for 34.6% of them it was a weekend break or up to two nights, while 33.3% stayed on the farm for 4 to 6 days. Week-long stays were preferred by 23.5% of respondents. Others (8.5%) spent in the countryside at least 10 days (for one-half of those it was 2 weeks and more). People taking fewer breaks usually declared a longer stay.

The respondents most often travelled to the country with their spouses or partners (84.6% of indications), friends (35.9%) and parents (14.5%). 10.7% of the respondents took a countryside break only with children. Occasionally the respondents mentioned different members of their immediate family or relatives.

The respondents mostly chose farms situated near inland waters (a lake or a river), in the mountains or close to the sea. These preferences seem to be quite universal, which is confirmed by American studies by Gao *et al.* (2014), showing that the crucial landscape attributes attracting tourists to the countryside are precisely those associated with nature - wildlife, the presence of water resources (but not wetlands) and forests. The most popular time to take a countryside break was summer (vacation) and the long May weekend. Details on this area are demonstrated in Figure 1.

The study enabled identification of the reasons behind taking a countryside break. The respondents most often pointed to the possibility to rest in tranquil rural atmosphere. They also appreciated the health profits of staying in the countryside (resulting from e.g. non-polluted air, close relation with nature), as well as the hospitality and kindness of the farmers. Details on this area are presented in Table 1. These elements seem to be universal and of key importance for farm-based recreation (both when choosing it and assessing its quality), although - depending on the country - their hierarchy may vary, which has been proved by the work of Kumbhar (2012) and Capriello *et al.* (2013).



Figure 1. Expected location of agritourism farms and time of stay (%)

*Note: The respondents could indicate more than one answer. Source: Own research.* 

*Table 1.* Factors determining the choice of the countryside as holiday destination and the choice of a specific agritourism farm (%)

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Chance to get familiar with local customs, traditions and folklore	15.4	Opportunity to bring own dog or cat	20.5
Need to change the form of recreation	12.0	Chance to get involved in traditional farm activities	13.7
Architectural cultural heritage (monuments, old buildings, churches, chapels)	11.5		
Chance to find out more about the nature of the farming life and field activities	10.3		
Opportunity of building close and immediate relationship with the rural hosts	9.7		

*Note: The respondents could indicate more than one answer. Source: Own research.* 

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The presence of farm animals and the possibility to interact with them was of great importance for a significant proportion of the respondents. A stay on a farm is often the unique chance for kids to familiarize with animals bred. Interacting with livestock can bring a lot of joy and excitement, especially to children from cities who do not have daily contact with animals bred in the country. It is worth emphasizing that other authors have also noticed the important role of animals in agritourism. Gao *et al.* (2014) proved that farm animals' presence is the most preferred component of tourists' expectations regarding agricultural functions of a farm.

Perhaps, as Busby, Rendle (2000) notes, this is due to the fact that a large proportion of tourists simply have some assumptions about what the farm life should look like and expect a specific image, where farm animals are an indispensable component. This can be confirmed by the high, third position of 'farm hands-on experience' (including, among others, feeding animals) among tourists' associations related to farm-based recreation, what Barbieri *et al.* (2016) wrote about. Already in the 1980s, Hoyland (1982) made an interesting observation, which may be relevant in this context, that perhaps farmers who cannot take good care of animals have less chance of a success in interacting with people.

Interestingly, the village's historical heritage, both material and spiritual, turned out to be extremely insignificant – in contrast to the findings of American researchers Gao et al. (2014), who showed that for American visitors historical heritage was one of the three crucial factors determining the attractiveness of a rural destination. Perhaps this is due to the different nature of the US countryside and its lower saturation with heritage sites, resulting from the different history of North America. It is worth emphasizing that selecting the countryside as a holiday destination was not driven by price competitiveness in a first place.

However, the costs turned out to play a crucial role in choosing a particular farm. The respondents also attached great importance to the distance and convenience of travel.

They also cared about the standard of the accommodation and (due to the characteristics of the surveyed group) availability of attractions for children, Similar preferences have been observed in other countries by Capriello *et al.* (2013).

A stay in the countryside is a great opportunity to engage in various physical activities with children. This was also the opinion of the respondents - 73.9% of them indicated that their farm-based recreation involved physically activities. This confirms the findings of Barbieri *et al.* (2016), who proved that 'on-farm and outdoor recreation' (like horse riding or hiking) are by far the most frequent tourists' association related to farm-based recreation. In our study, the respondents most often took cycling and hiking trips (Figure 2).

*Figure 2.* Most popular forms of physical activity, undertaken together by the responders and their kids, in the countryside recreation (%)



*Note: The respondents could indicate more than one answer. Source: Own research.* 

The activities declared by the respondents may also be undertaken in their everyday environment, which was usually the city. The countryside is, however, much better in this case because of the smaller traffic, new, pretty landscapes, and higher air quality.

In the survey the responders were also requested to point out the recreational activities which they would like to take part in with their children while taking a countryside break. The most common answers included: bonfire / barbecue, tasting of regional dishes and sightseeing tours around the area. Details on this subject are demonstrated in Figure 3. Parents of older children more often pointed to activities enabling them to learn more about the material and non-material culture of the country, as well as to acquire specific skills. Parents of younger children, however, much more often

indicated the opportunity to watch and interact with farm animals. A vital part of the research was the identification of attractions that were incredibly popular with children. Parents' opinions on this subject are presented in Figure 4.

*Figure 3.* Activities the respondents would like to take part in with their children while taking a countryside break (%)



*Note:* The respondents could indicate more than one answer. *Source:* Own research.

*Figure 4.* The popularity of selected attractions on an agritourism farm among children in the opinion of their parents (%)



*Note:* The respondents could indicate more than one answer. *Source:* Own research.

It should be noted, that the popular activities for children included those that allow them to be around farm animals and learn more about rural life and work on a farm. This demonstrates a high demand for knowledge transfer in this area and is a good prognostic for the development of e.g. educational farms. Such initiatives have been disseminated in Poland since 2011 and are becoming increasingly popular.

The educational dimension of agritourism was also recognized by Barbieri *et al.* (2016), as in their study, it proved to be the second most frequently indicated association related to rural recreation. Interestingly, this phenomenon has been observed not only among tourists who want to learn about the farm life, but also farmers who cast themselves in the role of educators. Combining the agricultural and tourism function is therefore beneficial for rural areas, especially for traditional farms, in many different dimensions.

## 5. Conclusions

A recreation in the countryside combined with stay on an agritourism farm is a source of benefits for tourists of all ages. For adults, this is a great opportunity for active recreation in a clean, peaceful and visually attractive environment, which promotes the regeneration of physical and mental strengths. On the other hand, agritourism is a remarkable opportunity to familiarise children with farm life and agriculture, and, moreover, to overcome numerous adverse and untrue stereotypes about rural areas and its residents.

Summing up the conducted research, one can formulate several generalizations and conclusions:

1. Respondents visited agritourism farms mainly two times a year. These were relatively short trips - 80% of respondents preferred a break of no longer than 6 days. Most of the respondents preferred several shorter breaks to one longer holiday.

2. Farms situated near inland waters (a lake or a river), in mountain areas or close to the sea were found most attractive by the respondents. The country was visited most often during the summer holidays and the long May weekend.

3. Due to the fact that the main motives for the respondents to take a countryside break included the opportunity to relax in tranquillity, non-polluted air, close relation with nature, as well as the hospitality and kindness of the farmers, it can be concluded that agritourism is no longer perceived through the prism of low cost only.

However, costs turned out to be the main determinant of the choice of a particular farm. In addition to the price, the respondents also paid attention to the farm accommodation standard. This would call for some form of quality certification. The attempt to develop a quality certification system for rural agritourism farms was made by the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism 'Guest Farms'. Unfortunately, though its

long presence, the system has not been widely recognised and probably for this reason more and more agritourism service providers resign from this form of certification.

4. During their farm-based recreation, tourists often engage in active recreation. Among the respondents, cycling and hiking were the most popular recreational activities. This should be a signal for local authorities responsible for the infrastructure created, developed and maintained for tourism purposes, e.g., trails, tracks and footpaths dedicated to diverse forms of qualified tourism.

5. The activities that allowed the young generation to interact with farm animals and to find out more about life and labour in the countryside were found very attractive by both children and their parents.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the respondents were satisfied with the recreation in the countryside. This is evidenced by the fact that 97.4% of them intended to visit agritourism farms again. Moreover, the same amount of responders would suggest this form of recreation to relatives or friends with kids. This is the proof of contentment of the countryside break and a positive omen of possible development of the tourism function of rural areas and farms in the future.

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