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Agri-Cultural Tourism: Linking the Arts and Humanities with Agricultural Direct Marketers and Specialty Producers

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



Agri-Cultural Tourism: Linking the Arts and Humanities with Agricultural Direct Marketers and Specialty Producers

Abstract

In South Dakota, we are linking artists and specialty producers in a unique "Agri-Cultural Tourism" approach. In sparsely populated areas, agritourism enterprises have a difficult time attracting potential tourists. By partnering specialty agricultural enterprises with nearby or regional artists and other cultural entities and events, a critical mass of attractions can be created. This article provides an example of the critical partnership between cooperative extension, stakeholders, and numerous allied organizations that served as a catalyst for an on-going Agri-Cultural tourism alliance. It also highlights key issues and steps identified by the participants to assure continued development progress in the state.

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Introduction

Agritourism is on the rise throughout the United States, reflecting a rise in agricultural nostalgia in urban populations. Gush (2005) notes: "This nostalgia is an emotional phenomenon quite possibly capable of saving the small American family farm from extinction." Reeder and Brown (2005) found that increased rural tourism improved local economies through higher employment rates and income, and decreased poverty rates. While these benefit patterns are not consistent across all rural areas, they are promising. Several authors have noted the opportunities for Extension professionals to help facilitate community, and rural development through partnerships with relevant interest groups and stakeholders (Honadle, 1990; Selin & McGill, 2005).

A major challenge for developing agritourism in South Dakota is the low population density and lack of traditional attractions sufficient to draw customers into a particular geographic region. However, this same low population density is precisely what appeals to tourists from urban areas wanting to experience rural culture. Rural culture is broader than agricultural production and can include local artists, artisans, writers, poets, galleries, museums, and even performance arts. Agritourism operations can and should link with the whole range of cultural experiences available in their landscape to entice visitors.

Specialty producers in South Dakota also face marketing challenges due to the area's low population density and the distance to population centers. In 2002, fruit and vegetable growers and wineries, with facilitation by South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service (SDCES), formed the "South Dakota Specialty Producers Association (SDSPA)," which now represents a wide range of non-commodity agricultural products. One of their primary goals is to support producers and value-added entrepreneurs with marketing, particularly direct marketing, of their products. The SDSPA recognizes that tourists present a potential market and has actively encouraged agritourism development.

Over the past 2 years, a coalition was formed to increase linkages between specialty producers and the South Dakota art community. It began with discussions of the similarities of direct marketing challenges for specialty producers and artists. An initial project was development of an agritourism session at an SDSU value-added conference, introducing cluster development concepts. Speakers highlighted key areas in creating networks of agritourism and cultural entities, bringing leadership in the arts and in the SDSPA together to identify common goals.

The result was the forging of a leadership alliance and common language to carry the ideas back to the respective associations. The South Dakota Art Museum director, specialty producers, interested South Dakota State University (SDSU) faculty and SDCES representatives, and various members of the arts and humanities community began to explore ways to work together.

Agri-Cultural Alliance

A working consortium formed under the auspices of the South Dakota Art Museum and coined the term "Agri-Cultural" to describe the confluence of agricultural and cultural entities. Groups involved in the consortium are:

- Brookings Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Granary Rural Cultural Center
- Independent artists
- South Dakota Art Museum
- South Dakota Arts Council
- South Dakota Dept. of Tourism and State Development
- South Dakota Humanities Council
- South Dakota Specialty Producers
- South Dakota State University, College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences faculty
- South Dakota State University Cooperative Extension Service
- South Dakotans for the Arts

The name "Agri-Cultural Alliance" was chosen, and mission and vision statements developed (Table 1).

Table 1.
Agri-Cultural Alliance Mission and Vision Statement

Mission:	To foster markets for artists and specialty producers in South Dakota through development and enhancement for Agri-Cultural tourism networks.
Vision:	Specialty producers and artists share common challenges in identifying and cultivating a customer base for their products/creations, particularly in rural areas. By working together, we can create a critical mass of unique activities, events, sites, attractions, and products to draw potential customers to an area. We believe that South Dakota can offer a unique experience by including the broad spectrum of rural community culture — artists and artisans, family-owned farms and ranches, museums, galleries, specialty shops, and cultural events.

Agri-Cultural Tourism: Art and the Land Conference

It was decided that a statewide conference was needed to introduce the Agri-Cultural Tourism concept to the arts community, the specialty producers, and allied organizations. The Agri-Cultural Alliance accordingly organized a two-day workshop to promote and encourage Agri-Cultural tourism network development and to identify ways of working together. Examples of topics included:

- What is Agri-Cultural Tourism, and what do we need to know to make it work?
- Identifying a customer base
- Creating and using networks to build critical mass

- Resources for creating and fostering sustainable niche markets
- Promoting rural community cultural experiences and products.

Speakers and panelists representing successful agritourism or cultural tourism enterprises and associations in the northern Great Plains region shared their experiences and insights. Networking among participants was strongly encouraged throughout the program. To foster further interaction, 30 vendors, including sponsoring organizations, private artists, specialty producers, wineries, and Tribal tourism associations, displayed the range of activities and enterprises in the region.

Speakers advocated using both local and global approaches to expand markets, emphasizing identification of assets and networking to build opportunities to succeed within the landscape of South Dakota.

Discussions centered around three intertwining areas: creating a common vision, networking, and marketing considerations. The common vision was critical to provide not only the end goal, but also strategies to reach that goal. Participants said the vision should be put into writing and revisited often.

Networking was seen as integral to the process, generating the critical mass of events and products coupled with sites and attractions within our rural landscape to attract customers and provide unique experiences. It was noted that passion must be coupled with economic intelligence, including the development of business plans for both individuals and networks. Networking was also understood to be an essential component in marketing, promoting the network along with individual operations. Participants were urged to "be prepared to market your neighbor as much as yourself." It was noted that a vision for marketing must include both local and international components: While dwelling "within the box of South Dakota," one must think outside it, i.e., "think globally, and act locally."

A common thread throughout the discussion was the potential impact and inherent skills of each individual. Participants described a "garden of people" growing together across the state to produce a diversity of products, places, and events all working together to attract customers. New leadership and advocates would be cultivated through education (including events such as this conference).

And finally, as appropriate in a meeting linking the artistic community with specialty producers, it was noted that "our greatest asset is our creativity," which could be used to develop unique products and experiences. This meshing of rural environment with creative thinking could overcome marketing challenges to develop the web of opportunities to make South Dakota a destination.

Key action steps identified at the conference for building on the Agri-Cultural vision for South Dakota are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Key Action Steps in Building Agri-Cultural Tourism in South Dakota and Subsequent Progress

Step	Suggestion	Outcomes
<p>One: Inventory and map assets.</p>	<p>Create a cyclical calendar of events. Consider grouping events regionally on the same date to provide critical mass for destination tourism.</p>	<p>Events calendars are available on a number of area Web sites, including tourism, art and humanities associations, and private businesses. For example, one farm winery lists local arts and community events on its Web site.</p>
<p>Two: Act locally. Encourage local leadership and patrons.</p>	<p>Support and talk up colleagues. Educate the first responders (e.g., restaurants and lodging personnel are frequently asked "what is there to do around here?"). Work with Chambers of Commerce to market to visitors of other events. Example: Attendees of a regional soccer found information on art galleries and art cooperatives in their information packet. Develop flyers</p>	<p>A farm winery brings in artists and musicians to its annual wine festival. A small town integrates farm tours, museum and arboretum visits, demonstrations, and art and crafts vendors in a</p>

	such as "gallery crawl," "hidden jewels," or "specialty market trails" for distribution by Chambers of Commerce, information centers, and lodging establishments	"Destination German*ation" festival. A second statewide conference this fall will emphasize development of local tourism clusters.
Three: Educate for the future.	Work with after-school programs to educate next generation of leadership. Keep abreast of regional and state developments, and be ready to advocate the vision to new partners.	An effort is being made to integrate the hospitality industry along with the artists and producers in the second conference.
Four: Chart the future and benchmark accomplishments	Establish conferences/planning session at intervals to assess what has been accomplished, and continue to develop the vision.	The "Agri-Cultural" concept has been integrated into regional tourism workshops within the state, and a regional tourism center is taking the leadership in developing a second statewide conference.

Outcomes and Impacts

In an end-of-conference survey, the average participant score to the question, "Was the information presented relevant and useful to you?" was "8" (1-10 scale; 10 being best). Most (81%) of the 85 attendees reported that they could "very likely" benefit from the development of Agri-Cultural tourism and that they were "very likely" (63%) or "somewhat likely" (37%) to change their strategies in the upcoming year based on the ideas and information from the conference. Many reported excitement at acquiring new ideas; others reported that they felt the information and networking would enhance their current efforts.

In a post-conference survey (24% response rate), 95% wanted a second conference. When asked "If you could design one workshop, what would it be?" almost all respondents indicated some aspect of marketing. Community organization, school/art/farm collaborations, and regional collaborations were also mentioned. In response, a second conference has been planned (Table 2). Table 2 also gives other examples of progress made in the past year on the steps identified at the first conference.

The role of Extension and other university faculty throughout this process has been to foster the connections between agricultural producers and other members of their rural communities and regions, serving as an essential catalyst at critical junctures. Now that the vision has been shared, the stakeholders and related associations have taken leadership to move it forward. We see a bright future ahead for our rural state!

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South Dakota State University Experiment Station Technical Paper 3587.

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