

Human-Environment Relationships in Texas Agritourism

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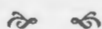
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Abstract:

Tourism literature is saturated with reports about tourism's effects on the natural environment; however, little research has been conducted regarding tourism's impact on human-environment relationships. Through semi-structured interviews and a survey, this study explored the ways in which Texas agritourism operators value their land and construct their personal relationships with the natural environment. With the research data, Urry's (1992) four ideal types of societal relationships with the environment were tested: stewardship, exploitation, scientization, and visual consumption. Research participants possess diverse relationships with nature and most individuals demonstrated aspects from more than one of Urry's categories. In addition, strong relationships with nature were encountered that were not compatible with Urry's four categories; therefore, the study proposes the addition of two ideal types: spiritualization and sociality.

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A "love affair" accurately describes the relationship between many Texans and the land they own (Gunter & Oelschlaeger 1997). Similar to most love affairs, this one developed slowly over a period of time. When Europeans first began claiming ownership of land that would eventually become the state of Texas, the land was "conquered" through deforestation, fencing, tilling, and irrigation in order to make it more habitable. Adapting agricultural practices to the inhospitable land allowed for these farmers and ranchers to develop a deep pride in their agricultural methods and a strong, intimate connection with their land. This heritage has been passed down through generations. As a result, current landowners possess an intense passion for utilizing their land to the best of their ability and feel a deep satisfaction in their land's history. Agricultural heritages and land ownership are highly valued throughout the state of Texas. For example, over 4,000 farms and ranches have been honored through the state's Family Land Heritage program, which recognizes agricultural operations that have been in continuous operation by the same family for at least 100 years (Texas Dept. of Agriculture 2010).

However, the process of globalization has impacted the current economic situation for farmers and ranchers in Texas and throughout the world. Previously competitive markets for fruit, vegetables, and animal products have been inundated by worldwide supplies, resulting in significantly decreased prices (Veck, Che, & Veck 2006). Farmers and ranchers who desire to keep their operation in business must recuperate their lost income. In many cases, at least one member of the household secures

outside employment. Entrepreneurial farmers and ranchers have also developed creative on-site income generating opportunities. For example, some have chosen to grow nontraditional crops (e.g., lavender), cater to niche markets (e.g., organic), or invite visitors (e.g., bed and breakfast).

The entrepreneurial farmers who invite visitors to their property have created a link between agriculture and the tourism industry. This agricultural tourism, or agritourism, may include a wide variety of activities, such as pick-your-own produce, nature tours, overnight stays, and horseback riding. While rarely labeled "agritourism," Texas farmers and ranchers actively invite visitors to their property. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (2009) most recent census of agriculture, over 5,000 farms in Texas reported income from agritourism and recreational services. Tourism is often encouraged as a method of rural development, but it is coupled with qualms that the development will negatively impact local culture, heritage, and tradition. Heritage tourism, for example, has been accused of standardizing and sanitizing local cultures (Bunten 2008). Agritourism, however, creates a space for economic development while simultaneously continuing agricultural heritages and educating others about agricultural lifestyles (McGehee 2007; see also Bowen, Cox, & Fox 1991; Hjalager 1996). In the following section, I will explain my research goal and its connection with Texas agritourism.

Context

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which agritourism operators value their land and construct their relationships with the natural environment. Human perceptions of nature are socially constructed and historically and geographically specific. Therefore, there is not one "nature;" rather, multiple natures exist (MacNaughten & Urry 1995). Urry (1992) asserted that society's relationships with nature can be categorized into four ideal types:

- Stewardship – carefully tending for nature in such a way as to leave it as an inheritance for others
- Exploitation – perceiving nature as a resource separate from society, to be used by humans to its fullest potential
- Scientization – behaving as if nature is an object of study that can be controlled and manipulated
- Visual consumption – perceiving nature as an aesthetic landscape to be viewed but not used

In the discussion section of this paper, I will utilize these ideal types to demonstrate how they do and do not accurately depict Texas agritourism operators and their relationships with their land.

Academic literature offers numerous definitions for agritourism (Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock 2010; Busby & Rendle 2000). For the purpose of this study, agritourism is broadly defined as a visit to an agricultural setting for recreation, education, or leisure.

Unlike several other states (e.g., Oklahoma and Georgia), Texans do not generally use the word "agritourism." Therefore, some of the farmers and ranchers included in my study would not classify themselves as agritourism operators. Similarly, many of the participating farmers and ranchers would not refer to their visitors as "tourists."

Tourism literature is saturated with research related to tourism's effects on the natural environment (Kuvan 2005; Neto 2003; Nim 2006; Russell & Wallace 2004). However, there is little research related to the ways in which tourism affects human relationships with the natural environment (Gössling 2002). In a first step toward this analysis, it is necessary to define what those relationships are; only then can we explore the ways in which agritourism, or any other form of tourism, influences the human-environment relationships. Texas agritourism farmers and ranchers exhibit diverse relationships with their natural world, but they share a desire to create a social community through the natural world. Next, I will discuss the methods I utilized in order to explore the human-environment relations among the agritourism operators.

Methods

Interviews and an online survey were used to gather data for this project. Participants were asked about the history of their agricultural operation, their motivations for hosting visitors, their perceptions of nature, and their opinions about environmental sustainability.

Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted: one with an employee of Texas AgriLife Extension Service and six with owners of agricultural operations (one vineyard, two ranches, and three farms). Rather than random selection, I deliberately chose the interviewees in order to talk with persons who lived in diverse geographical locations (from the Panhandle Plains to the Eastern Pineywoods), possessed different occupational backgrounds, and, based on the text of their website, expressed different environment-related perspectives. All of the interview participants were White and were married in heterosexual relationships. Over half of the interviewees had earned a college degree; two held a Master's degree. Half of the interviewees have worked in agriculture their entire adult lives and have farmed land that was passed down to them from their parents; others moved from the suburbs within the last ten years to begin farming. Except for one agnostic family, all interviewees expressed Christian religious beliefs. Interviews were conducted on-site and I received a tour of each farm/ranch, which afforded me a brief glimpse into the daily workings of the operation. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and hand coded.

Survey

Due to time and budget constraints, I used an online survey to gain perspectives from additional Texas farmers and ranchers. I obtained a list of agritourism operations from Texas AgriLife Extension Service and supplemented it through online searches for additional operations. In total, the online survey was emailed to 400 agricultural operations located across the entire state.

Forty-seven email addresses bounced back as undeliverable; therefore, 353 agricultural operations received the invitation. Seventy-six surveys were returned producing a response rate of 21.5%. Survey responses were anonymous and demographical information, such as race and gender, was not collected from survey participants.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of my research demonstrate that Texas farmers and ranchers possess diverse relationships with nature. Each interviewee demonstrated aspects from more than one of the previously discussed ideal types of human-environment relations suggested by Urry. Next, I will highlight the assorted ways in which Texas farmers and ranchers do and do not concur with each of Urry's categories: stewardship, exploitation, scientization, and visual consumption. However, because I encountered strong relationships with nature that were not compatible with any of these four categories, I will also propose the addition of two more ideal types:

- Spiritualization – care and reverence for nature resulting from beliefs in its divine origin or composition
- Sociality – utilizing nature as a means for creating social community

Stewardship

Urry (1992, p. 2) referred to land stewardship, "so as to provide a better inheritance for future generations living within a given local area." According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n. d.), *stewardship* is defined as "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; especially: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care." Whereas Urry defined the concept solely in terms of the end result, the denotation of stewardship also encompasses the method for accomplishing stewardship. Several interview participants noted that they were practicing stewardship when engaging in particular farming methods. For example, one farmer said, "I was tryin' to do no-till cotton 15 years ago. [laughs] It was not too easy. And now, it's commonplace, which is good. To me, that's better stewardship of the land." Because no-till cotton can reduce soil erosion and increase the number of nutrient-rich microbes in the soil, this farmer associated the method with stewardship.

Family is implied in Urry's notion of stewardship since the end goal is to provide for "future generations" in the local area. While every farmer and rancher I spoke with expressed pride and enjoyment in their work, several participants also demonstrated ambivalence in regard to their children entering the agriculture industry; in fact, one farmer indubitably informed me that he hopes his children do not choose to farm. Another farmer said, "It's like having a dairy. You can't just get up and go somewhere. 'Cause you got all the animals to take care of. Even if there aren't people here [at the hotel], you've still got the animals. Keeps you really tied down." These farmers are practicing stewardship, but, due to the constraints of an agricultural lifestyle, they hope the future generation who inherits their land will not be their children.

Exploitation

Urry (1992, p. 2) defined a relationship of exploitation with the environment as "seeing nature as separate from society and

available for its maximum instrumental appropriation." Similarly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n. d.) definition of *exploit* is "to make productive use of: utilize." However, in U.S. American culture, *exploit* possesses strong negative connotations that are not present in either Urry's or the dictionary's definition. In all of my interviews with farmers and ranchers, I did not encounter anyone who intentionally misused or harmed their natural environment. On the contrary, several farmers clearly expressed an awareness that their land required care in order for it to continue being agriculturally productive. For example, regarding the idea of environmental sustainability, one farmer said:

We constantly have to be geared toward environmentally-friendly, environmentally sustainable. I mean, that is our goal. In practice, it's a whole other ballgame. But I do think you have to have that as a foundation. I mean, you've got to be geared that way or you won't be around. You know, I can rape the land, and in ten years, I'll be out of business.

Therefore, my assessment of farmers and ranchers who demonstrate Urry's relationship of exploitation will focus purely on his definition and will include no connotation of abuse or neglect.

Each of my interview participants expressed Urry's exploitation relationship in their goals to fully capitalize on their natural resources; for example, one interviewed farmer who hosts an annual corn maze chose its particular location to better utilize a corner of a field. To accomplish this task, he used a central pivot irrigation system, which waters a circular area within a square section of field, leaving the corners unirrigated. While it is possible to also irrigate the corners, it is more difficult. Utilizing one of the corners for the corn maze makes the extra watering effort financially worthwhile, and makes use of a corner rather than leaving it unplanted. Similarly, when talking about new landowners, the Extension Agent said, "And so many of them want some projects that are gonna be worthwhile, whether they're making money from them or breaking even. But they want to do something with their property." Farmers and ranchers who have an exploitative relationship with their land believe they are wasting resources if they are not fully used.

Many participants of my study combine the methods defined within Urry's exploitative relationship together with the end results in his stewardship relationship; this combination was often perceived as sustainable. For example, one farmer who had moved from the suburbs said, "We didn't really think there was a good reason to purchase land in the country and just sit on it. Our concept was that the land should pay for itself, be productive. ... And if we plan to stay on ten acres and be productive, we must take care of the soil." In this way, the land is fully employed but simultaneously nurtured.

Of course, as with all ideal types, there will always be exceptions. One farmer described his spouse's relationship with the land by stating, "She's one of those people that [believes] you can't really own land. Nobody really has a right to sell it, and we should all use it to the best of our ability." In this way, his spouse clearly demonstrated an exploitative relationship with nature in her belief that we should use land to the best of our ability; however, she

simultaneously disagreed with the exploitative relationship in her belief that land cannot be "owned" by humans. Land is intertwined with society, rather than separated, and should not be objectified so that it may be "owned."

Scientization

Urry (1992, p. 2) defined a relationship of scientization with the environment as "treating the environment as the object of scientific investigation and hence some degree of intervention and regulation." Similar to the exploitation relationship, nature is objectified; yet, through the process of scientization, it is also systematically studied for the purposes of manipulation and control. All agricultural operations use science because they work the land and/or care for animals in ways that would not occur outside of human intervention, but some farmers demonstrate a relationship of scientization more formally than others. For example, the vineyard owner shared the following information with me about various methods for training grapevines:

We use a form of training called Geneva Double Curtain. We also use quadrilateral trellising. And then we have the standard VSP to compare it with—that's vertical shoot positioning—and, because of the way we train the grapes, the quadrilateral plan is, instead of just having the stalk and two arms, which is the VSP system, we bring two trunks up, train them to the opposite side, and then split those into four arms, two on each side. And that means that your plants produce 30 to 40% more, especially with the type of grape we're growing. But the orange muscat is on VSP, and one row that we're comparing. Our [Texas] A & M rep wanted to just test and see which one produced more grapes, and it's easy to see which one even before we weigh them.

The different training methods and the measured differences between them are clear examples of a relationship of scientization; there is formal investigation occurring as the vineyard owner intervenes in the natural grapevine growing process in order to determine the most productive training methods.

Urry's definition of scientization described the practices involved in the relationship—treating the environment as an object of study—but did not suggest the motives leading to these practices or the results of the relationship. A farmer of 600+ acres informed me that his motivation for utilizing science and technology was to make farming easier. He said, "More has happened in the last ten years in agriculture than the previous hundred. Technology is just unreal. ... So, from a farmer standpoint, we embrace a lot of this technology, and it makes life easy." However, he went on to share some uncertainties that he possesses regarding a particular scientific technology.

You know, genetically-altered plants where we can spray Round-Up over the top. Don't have to spray insecticides hardly at all anymore. On paper and in theory, that's great. It makes our life easy. The effect that it has on the consumer, who knows? I've read a lot of stuff. GMOs is what they call them—genetically modified organisms—that there may be some issues

with them. ... About all we can do is go by the FDA, what they release, and what they say is okay. I've read the pros and cons and research papers. A lot of it depends on who's doin' the research. So, I don't know what the truth is. I know it has made our life easier.

Therefore, a relationship of scientization can simplify agricultural work, but it may also create personal ethical issues that are not easily resolved.

Similarly, some techniques developed via science can raise questions about the authenticity of the agricultural product. Regarding GMO-corn, a small-scale organic farmer said:

A lot of reputable sources say that when you grow the corn from Monsanto, you have to spray what is basically Round-Up on it, or it won't grow. So, you have to buy the seeds from them, and then you have to buy the chemical to spray on it to make it grow. To me, that's not corn. It's something, but it's not corn.

In this way, science may alter agricultural products to such a degree that some people no longer perceive them as natural.

Visual Consumption

Urry (1992, p. 2-3) defined the concept of visual consumption as "constructing the physical environment as a 'landscape' (or townscape) not primarily for production but embellished for aesthetic appropriation." The idea of visual consumption is inherent in tourism where visitors' intentions involve seeing and experiencing new locations. In agritourism, the physical farm or ranch is a primary draw for visiting.

Each of the agricultural operations that I interviewed demonstrated some level of concern or active engagement in producing an attractive landscape. The vineyard, which also hosts on-site weddings, served as the clearest example. The owner described the process as she and her husband sought an appropriate piece of property to purchase:

We wanted it to have some aesthetic appeal. ... We wanted a feeling of openness and a view, so that when people come, they feel like they're in the country. So, that was important. We have a very nice view to the north, and the property sits well, so it was aesthetically appealing.

While each of the agricultural operations that I interviewed demonstrated a desire to create visually appealing space, each operation was also a working farm or ranch. In this way, they do not entirely fit into Urry's relationship of visual consumption; their agricultural "landscape" is intended for production in addition to visual consumption. In fact, for some operations, the production is primary and the aesthetic appeal comes secondary. For example, while the vineyard contained several beautifully manicured gardens, the property of another farmer contained no decorative landscaping; in fact, her only attempts to increase the attractiveness of her property involved a decorative sign with the farm name and a small, restored barn. This farmer's main purpose was to raise animals; the school and Girl Scout groups who toured her farm were secondary to the production.

Spiritualization

Urry's ideal types exclude religious or spiritual relations with the environment, but I encountered these relationships during the course of my research. Therefore, I propose a fifth ideal type: spiritualization – a sense of care and reverence for nature resulting from beliefs in its divine origin or composition. For example, an agnostic farmer described the way in which he perceived two other local farming families and their religious connections to nature:

They're both uber-religious, and they do it because that's the way God wants us to do it. You know, "We shouldn't use any chemicals or anything else." And probably over 85 or 90% of the people I've talked to that are doing what we're doing in some shape, form, or fashion are, you know, it's all about being responsible stewards of the land, and it's a very religious deal for them.

This lifestyle, where specific farming practices are and are not used in accordance with the perception of what God wants, demonstrated that religion can shape or even dictate the relationship that farmers have with their land and the practices they use when engaging with their land. In some cases, religion even creates meaning and symbolic value where there otherwise might not have been. For example, one farmer described how Christianity directed her to a relationship with a particular species of animal:

I always just thought sheep were awesome. Sheep are a major reference in the Christian faith, and it's been important to me for that reason. Shepherds, sheep, it's a very big part of that, and all of the symbolism is very meaningful to me, so I just had a soft place in my heart for sheep.

Even nonreligious farmers may exhibit the spiritualization relationship with nature. For example, while interviewing the Extension Agent, he described an extreme level of passion for living life "naturally:"

The way I break it down a little bit, on the one end [are] the individuals that want to be as natural as possible, which is the vast majority. But on the other end, there's individuals that it's almost a religion to them. I mean, every moment of every day they're thinking about what is natural. Everything from water filters to only buying organic baby food or natural raw milk. They almost elevate it to a religious standpoint that their whole life revolves around natural. Natural only.

In this way, the desire for the "natural" may become so sanctified and personally fundamental that it becomes a religion itself.

Sociality

Through the course of my research, I became acutely aware of the ways in which agritourism farmers and ranchers use their natural environments to create social communities. Whereas traditional farmers frequently work in seclusion, nontraditional farmers and ranchers who invite visitors onto their land regularly engage and

interact with new people. Therefore, I also propose a sixth ideal type to Urry's list: sociality – utilizing nature as a means for social community.

Nearly all of my interview participants stated that meeting new people was a highlight of their work. For the introverted farmers and ranchers, the shift to an occupation that involves regular interaction with the public was often a difficult but fulfilling transition. One farmer described the evolution in this way:

Whereas when we were just farmin', you're pretty isolated. You're kind of a loner-type individual. And that transition's been hard for me, but it's been well worth it. Dealin' with the public is not always easy, but at the end of the day, the things that they have said—the encouragement—it makes it well worth it.

Two of the three interview participants who left the suburbs and moved to rural areas expressed epiphanies that the transition would result in a greater sense of community. One family realized through the process of growing crops that they simply produced too much for themselves; it needed to be shared. The other farmer arrived at this understanding after inviting a suburban friend to spend the day with her on the farm:

She helped me dig in the garden, and we had a great day. We got really exhausted. We sweated. We had a ball. She called me later that night and said, “[farmer's name], thank you so much. That was so healing to me. That was so refreshing, and it was just what I needed.” And it kind of dawned on me that this just wasn't for me; this property wasn't really for me, it was for me to share.

Not all farmers and ranchers experience the sociality of the natural environment. As previously mentioned, many traditional farmers who complete their work in relative isolation do not experience nature as a means to social relations, nor do they expect to do so. However, when farmers intend to create a social community through their agricultural work, but are prevented from doing so, the results are frustrating and demoralizing. I spoke with a farmer who moved from the suburbs about three years ago with his wife and two young children. Their original goal was to become a “community-centered” farm, but their plans have been halted and reworked due to their lack of acceptance into their new rural community.

My original intention was to be much more involved in the local community, whereas everyone who buys from us right now is in Dallas. The local community has not been particularly, I don't want to say “friendly.” “Friendly” is not the right word. They're very friendly. But we're from somewhere else. You know, there's very much a small-town mentality. There's a guy up the road who is a nice guy. I've actually started letting him work on our cars. And I talk to him all the time. One of the first times I talked to him, he said, “You know, you should go introduce yourself to ‘so and so.’ They're from somewhere else, too.” ... So, it's interesting trying to develop a sense of community in a community that's not open.

In this way, not only did the actions of others result in this family's personal lack of acceptance in the local community, but it also discouraged them from pursuing agricultural work that would build social cohesion within the community.

Conclusion

The goal of my research was to explore the ways in which Texas agritourism operators value their land and construct their relationships with the natural environment. By examining data gained through a survey and interviews, and by utilizing Urry's categorization of ideal types of societal relationships with nature, I outlined numerous ways in which my research participants illustrate each of the four ideal types: stewardship, exploitation, scientization, and visual consumption. In addition, I encountered strong relationships with nature that Urry's categories did not encompass, therefore, I proposed the addition of two ideal types: spiritualization and sociality. While my research participants displayed diverse relationships with nature, they each attempted to use their natural environment to build social community.

Similarly, each of my participants demonstrated a desire to use their natural resources wisely and appropriately, but the preferred methods for accomplishing this differed. Open dialogue amongst the farmers, ranchers, and other community members could facilitate empathy and tolerance between individuals of diverse motivations and assist in fostering social community. This community building combined with agritourism, which allows for economic development while continuing agricultural heritages, could transform fading rural areas into economically vibrant, environmentally conscious, and socially cohesive communities.

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