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FARMERS' AWARENESS, PERCEPTION, WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN AGRITOURISM IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT
This study assessed the awareness, perceptions, and willingness to participate in agritourism by farmers in Abia state, Nigeria. Multistage sampling technique was employed to select 120 farmers used for the study. Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentage and mean scores. The result showed that there was limited awareness of agritourism in the State among farmers. The farmers perceived agritourism as viable option to embark upon. Farmers were very willing to establish agritourism but were most challenged by lack of finance and the technical know-how on how to go about the establishment of agritourism centers in rural areas. The study recommended that extension agents should view this as a new responsibility in the State for advancing farming business by increasing farmer' awareness, encouraging their willingness to participate, and assisting them in overcoming the numerous challenges that impede farmers' ability to establish agritourism centers in rural areas of the State.
Keywords: Agritourism, farming household, awareness, perception, participation, challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Agritourism development is critical for poverty alleviation and rural development in developing countries like Nigeria. However, in comparison to affluent countries, the expansion of agritourism in developing countries, particularly in Nigeria, is slower (Bhatta and Ohe, 2019; Bhatta, Itagaki, and Ohe, 2019). Farmers' willingness, and ability to build the necessary infrastructure, as well as tourists' interest in visiting such farm attractions are the primary drivers of agritourism development (Bhatta, Ohe, Ciani, 2020; and Malkanthi, Ishana, Sivashankar, and Weeralal, 2015). The concept of agritourism innovation is increasing, and the importance of agritourism sustainability is being emphasized. As observed in the non-agricultural economy, agritourism innovation is thought to spur long-term growth of rural communities through agricultural farm modernization. It could entail creating an original tourism product at the destination, as well as integrating the necessary services and marketing the items. Firm infrastructure, human management, resource procurement, and technology development are all examples of innovative agritourism ventures. Agritourism innovation is critical for increasing the competitiveness of tourism businesses and tourist destinations.

People have been traveling to places outside of their own homes for vacation, business, or relaxation for a long time. That is, after all, the purpose of tourism. "Tourism comprises the actions of humans traveling to and staying in areas beyond their typical environment for not more than one year for leisure, business, and other purposes," (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Tourism can be classified according to the type of activity, location, or length of stay. As a result, you have cultural tourism, heritage tourism, geo-tourism, historical tourism, and so

on. The terms agritourism, farm tourism, farm-based tourism, and rural tourism have all been used interchangeably in the past (McGehee and Kim, 2004; Barbieri, 2010). Agritourism, according to Barbieri and Mshenga (2008), is "any practice adopted on a functioning farm to attract visitors." In recent years, agritourism has emerged as a rapidly increasing sector of the tourism business. The notion was drawn from western economies, which is where this business venture was born. It later spread to other developing nations like Nigeria. Agritourism, on the other hand, can be defined as all farmer-led activities targeted at attracting, accommodating, and entertaining tourists in a fee-based agricultural and rural setting (Bhatta, Ohe, and Ciani, 2020). Agritourism has remained a very vital development step in advancing farming business as well as in providing multiplication of opportunities for farmers to increase their fam income. It has also become a recent dynamic dimension in assessing livelihood opportunities that abounds for rural dwellers. According to 2004 research by the Agri Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC), 97% of metropolitan residents wish to experience the natural charm of country life. This demonstrates that there is a lucrative chance to build an agro-tourism center in the communities through agricultural operations. This gave agricultural extensionists a new role: to promote the benefits of rural farmers establishing agro-tourism facilities as a method to increase their revenue, sales, and knowledge of what they do as farmers. The establishment of agro-tourism by rural farming households will help to create income all year round, which will help to cover the farming household's regular expenses. Agritourism can be started in clusters in rural parts of Abia state by farming households. Farming households in rural parts of Abia state will be able to launch several more agro-tourism development co-operatives in the area if cluster agro-tourism development centers are established on a cooperative basis.

In Nigeria, there are some resemblances to the Songhai agro-tourism model. To name a few, there are state projects in Abi, Cross River State, Obudu Cattle Ranch in Calabar, Avia in Lagos, Meruwa and Makera in Katsina, Bunu Tai in Rivers and Heneke in Enugu, and Okomu Oil Palm Plantation in Benin, Nigeria. They are, however, not as numerous or established as the Republic of Benin's Songhai Farms. There is need for farming households and those interested in farming to take advantage of agro-full tourism's potential, which includes diversifying income streams. It harkens back to the days of the old Farm Settlements. Visitors to an agro-tourist center can try various activities such as horseback riding, tasting pure honey, savoring local cuisine, picking fresh fruits and vegetables, visiting stalls selling local and regional food, and shopping at hand-craft gift shops. People can come to the center to check out organic gardening in a rural setting. Thoughts and experiences with farmers on indigenous farming methods can be shared during such visits. Indigenous farmers' perspectives on a variety of concerns, including climate change, global warming, groundwater and arsenic pollution crises, and bio-fertilizers, among others, can be conveyed.

Despite the efforts made thus far to promote agritourism in Nigeria, not many States' agricultural households, such as those in Abia state, have been able to capitalize on the opportunities. This could be due to a lack of farmer awareness, poor perception, farmers' unwillingness to participate, and the other restricting obstacles that farmers in Abia State face. This study therefore assessed the awareness of agritourism by farmers, examined their perception about agritourism; ascertained their willingness to participate in agritourism and examined the challenges to participation faced by farmers.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Abia State, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. In the first stage, three (3) Local Governments Areas (LGAs) from the state were selected namely Umuahia North, Umuahia South and Ikwuano LGAs. The second stage involved a random selection of 2 communities each from the LGAs. This gave a total of six (6) communities used for the study. The third stage involved the selection of 2 villages from each of the communities and this gave a total of 12 villages sampled for the study. The last stage involved the selection of ten (10) respondents from each of the villages, and this gave a total

sample of 120 respondents. Data for the study were obtained using structured questionnaire and personal interviews. Data obtained were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. socioeconomic characteristics of the farmers were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentages, and means. The awareness of agritourism by farmers was examined using frequency distribution and percentages. The perception of farmers about agritourism and their willingness to participate in agritourism were analyzed using mean score. The item statements were rated on a four-point Likert rating scale of strongly agree =4, Agree = 3; Disagree = 2 and strongly disagree =1. To calculate the mean score using the five-point rating scale, a midway (decision cut-point) was calculated by summing the weights of the rating scales (4+3+2+1), which equaled 10 points, and then divided the total point by 4 to get a mean score of 2.50. Mean responses of ≥ 2.50 implied acceptance while values < 2.50 implied rejection. The challenges to participation faced by farmers in Abia state were examined using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socioeconomic characteristics of the farmers in the studied area

The result of the socioeconomic characteristics of the farmers in the studied area is presented in Table 1. The study found that females made up 59.2 % of the respondents. With 80.0 % of the respondents being married, and 6.7% being single. The plethora of married people had huge implication for family labour supply (lronkwe and Olajede, 2012). Also, marriage predisposes an individual to become more responsible since they must cater for their family needs. This finding is also in line with Ominikari, Onumadu and Nnamerenwa (2017) posited that being married confers some amount of stability to an individual in a household. According to the education statistics, 19.2 % had no formal education, 19.2 % had primary education, 25.0 %, secondary education, and 36.7%, tertiary education. Majority of the respondents (35.8%) were between the ages of 48 and 57, with only 1.7 % of them were between 18 -27 years. The respondents' average age was 49.33 years, indicating that the majority of them were still in their working years. The respondents are by their fairly youthful ages better positioned to go about their farming activities with much ease. The average household size of the farmers was 6.40 % per household. This implies that majority of the respondents had fairly large household size, which is within the national average of six (6) persons. The respondents who earned less than ₦50,000.00 annually were the most prevalent in the survey, accounting for 90 % of the total, followed by 7.5 % who earned up to ₦100,000.00 annually and few 1.7 % who earned at least ₦150,001.00 annually. This level of annual income is not sufficient enough to make farmers in the area to be seen as a more profitable occupation. This finding is consistent with the finding of Hamadina and Hamadina (2015) who opined that income from farming activities is often low and affects the poverty status of small holder farmers. This finding is also consistent with the finding of Chukwuneye (2016) and Onu (2016) who in their studies observed low annual income status among farmers.

The mean years of farming experience was 20.34 years. This portent that these farmers have been into the business for several years and may be considered quite experienced. This is an important factor for a successful farming business. Years of experience serves as a guide in combination and allocation of business resources, business management decision as well as in making forecast on the likely performance of a business especially when consideration is given to the risky nature of agriculture related business. Individuals who were members of a cooperative society dominated the poll, accounting for 52.5 %of all respondents. Membership to a cooperative society allows such members to have access to better farming information and credit as well as to enjoy economies of scale. The finding is consistent with that of Onubuogu *et al,* (2013) who observed that membership to cooperative society affords farmers the opportunity of sharing information on modern production techniques, purchasing inputs in bulk as well as exchanging labour, so by not joining these associations the farmers may not enjoy all these opportunities thereby reducing their productivity and their participation in market.

Table 1: Socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents

Socioeconomic characteristics	Frequency	%	Mean
Sex			
Male	49	40.8	
Female	71	59.2	
Total	120	100.0	
Marital status			
Single	8	6.7	
Married	96	80.0	
Widow	8	6.7	
Divorced	8	6.7	
Total	120	100.0	
Educational level			
No schooling	23	19.2	
Primary	23	19.2	
Secondary	30	25.0	
Tertiary	44	36.7	
Total	120	100.0	
Age of respondents			
18 – 27	2	1.7	
28 – 37	19	15.8	
38 – 47	26	21.7	
48 – 57	43	35.8	
58 – 67	30	25.0	
Total	120	100.0	49.33
Household size			
1-3	4	3.3	
4-6	63	52.5	
7 – 9	46	38.3	
10 -12	7	5.8	
Total	120	100.0	6.40
Annual Income			
1 – 50,000	108	90.0	
50,001 – 100,000	9	7.5	
100,001 – 150,000	1	0.8	
150,001 – 200,000	2	1.7	
Total	120	100.0	23,872.61
Years of Experience			
1 – 10	35	29.2	
11 – 20	30	25.0	
21 – 30	29	24.2	
31 – 40	25	20.8	
41 – 50	1	0.8	
Total	120	100.0	20.34
Cooperative membership			
Yes	63	52.5	
No	57	47.5	
Total	120	100.0	

Source: Field survey data, 2021

Awareness of agritourism among farmers in Abia state

The distribution of the respondents by awareness of agritourism is presented in Table 2. The study found that farmers who were not aware of agritourism made up 79.2 % of the respondents, while farmers that were aware, 20.8 %. This implied that farmers were not aware of agritourism

and what it entails. Awareness of agritourism and what it entails is very important as it propels farmers to establish it as a way of increasing farm revenue opportunities.

Table 2: Distribution of the respondents by awareness of agritourism

Awareness of agritourism	Freq.	%
Aware	25	20.8
Not aware	95	79.2
Total	120	100.0

Source: Field survey data, 2021

Perception of farmers on the importance of agritourism establishment in rural areas

The mean score responses of the respondents on their perception on the importance of agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state is presented in Table 3 below. The result showed that the grand mean score of the responses on their perception on the importance of agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state was 3.01 and is higher than the decision cut-point mean score of 2.50. This implied that on the average, farmers had the perception that agritourism is very important to be established in the study area. Of the ten (10) item statements on Table 3, nine (9) of the items had mean scores that were above 2.50 on a 4-point rating scale. This indicates that the respondents accepted items No.1 through No.7, No.9 and No.10 which bordered on the importance of agritourism establishment in rural areas. This implied that farmers in Abia state perceived the establishment of agritourism in rural areas important, in that it will provide the potential to increase local tax base in communities, provide educational opportunities to visitors about rural life and faming styles, help to preserve agricultural lands, encourage government to develop business enterprises in rural areas, provide social benefits to local community, promote farm products and farming in general and increase sales, and establishing agritourism in rural areas will provide youth with employment opportunities. Although, farmers perceived the establishment of agritourism centers in rural farm area as stressful in managing visitors and risky in bringing liability for accidents. They asserted that they would like agritourism to be established in their rural areas. This finding is supported by Krishna and Kumbhare, Sharma, Rao and Arpan (2019) who noted that farmers in Maharashtra and Goa in India perceive agritourism to be very important for establishment in rural area due to the various social benefits derivable from such establishment.

Table 3: Mean responses of respondents on their perception on the agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state

Perceived importance	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	$\bar{x}$	RM
Provides the potential to increase local tax base in communities	25	65	20	10	2.88	A
Provides educational opportunities to visitors about rural life and faming styles	55	57	6	2	3.38	A
Help to preserve agricultural lands	39	72	8	1	3.24	A
Encourages government to develop business enterprises in rural areas	50	52	12	6	3.22	A
Provides social benefits to local community	34	81	2	3	3.22	A
Promotes farm products and farming in general and increases sales	29	84	6	1	3.18	A
stressful in managing visitors and risky in boring liability for accidents	12	47	56	5	2.55	A
Increase the tendency to be attacked by armed robbers	13	22	45	40	2.07	R
Establishing agritourism in rural areas will provide youth with employment	56	48	10	6	3.28	A
I would like the establishment of agritourism in my area	42	56	12	10	3.08	A
Grand mean score					3.01	A

Source: Field Survey Data, 2021. Decision cut-point =2.50. Note: $\bar{x}$ = Mean response: RM = Remark; A = Acceptance; R = Rejection.

Willingness to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas

The mean score responses of the respondents on their willingness to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Mean responses of respondents on their willingness to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state

Willingness to participate in agritourism establishment	**Strongly Agree**	**Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	$\bar{x}$	**RM**
Are you willing to participate in the establishment of agritourism in your area	55	60	4	1	3.41	A
Are you willing to form a cluster with other farmers to establish agritourism	62	48	8	2	3.42	A
Are you willing to take advise form extension workers for technical support in establishing agritourism	47	68	2	3	3.33	A
Are you willing to share your land for agritourism	23	35	48	14	2.56	A
Are you going to be happy to host visitors on agritourism in your farm	40	54	23	3	3.09	A
Grand mean score					3.16	A

Source: Field Survey Data, 2021. Decision cut-point =2.50. Note: $\bar{x}$ = Mean response: RM = Remark; A = Acceptance

The result shows that the grand mean score of the responses of the respondents on their willingness to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state was 3.16 and is higher than the decision cut-point mean score of 2.50. This implied that on the average, the farmers are very much willing to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state. All the five (5) item statements on Table 4, had mean scores that are above 2.50 on a 4-point rating scale. This indicates that the respondents accepted items No.1 through No.5which boarders on the willingness to participate in agritourism establishment in rural areas of the state by farmers. This implies that farmers in Abia state are willing to participate in the establishment of agritourism in your area, willing to form a cluster with other farmers to establish agritourism, willing to take advise form extension workers for technical support in establishing agritourism, willing to share your land for agritourism, and are going to be happy to host visitors on agritourism in their farm. This finding is supported by Bhatta, Itagaki, and Ohe (2019) who noted that farmers willingness to start agritourism in rural Nepal as key in the development of agritourism in the area.

Challenges to participation in the establishment of agritourism

The distribution of the respondents by the challenges they faced in participating in the establishment of agritourism is presented in Table 5. The result shows that lack of finance to fund agritourism establishment (98.3%) ranked 1st was the most factor that limits the willingness of farmers to establish agritourism. This was followed by farmers lacking technical know-how on how to start agritourism in the study area. The least identified condition that challenges farmers ability to establish agritourism in the study area is the lack of agricultural marketing society in the area.

Table 5: Challenges to participation in the establishment of agritourism

Challenges	Freq.	%	Rank
Lack of finance to fund agritourism establishment	118	98.3	1st
Lack of technical know-how on how to start agritourism	112	93.3	2nd
High farm expenses	107	89.2	3rd
Labour unavailability	103	85.8	4th
Liability issues from accidents	101	84.2	5th
Small and fragmented land Holdings	99	82.5	6th
Inputs like improved seeds	86	71.7	7th
Soil erosion	82	68.3	8th
Lack of Irrigation facilities	75	62.5	9th
Lack of agricultural marketing Society	67	55.8	10th

Source: Field survey data, 2021

CONCLUSION

Agritourism remains a new vista for enhancing farm revenue, creating employment opportunities for the teaming population in the state. Agritourism awareness in the state is low, however, there is willingness among farmers to seriously consider the establishment of agritourism in the state is being supported via funding, technical know-how and other advisory services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Farmers' cooperatives should be interested in the growth of agro-tourism in the country because it is one of the quickest methods to employ unemployed youths, create long-term wealth for farmers, secure food security, and improve citizen health. Agriculture diversifies the rural economy, which has a knock-on effect. State Governments and affluent individuals should encourage agro-tourism centers around the state as a means of providing jobs for the state's burgeoning youth population, as well as developing their entrepreneurial abilities and providing training in various parts of agriculture. One or more farmers can band together to form agro-tourism centers where they can engage in large-scale chicken, fish, piggery, grass cutter and

rabbit farming, fruit and vegetable farming, goat and sheep farming, snail farming, and other activities. There should be hotel/lodging facilities, as well as leisure facilities such as a sports field, a swimming pool, and children's play areas, as well as training facilities.

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