A Profile of Canadian Agritourists and the Benefits They Seek

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Abstract

The family farm is being threatened by changes in agriculture and the globalization of our food system. In response, many farms have diversified into tourism. However, farm diversification into tourism is based more on a leap of faith than on solid market research. Using data drawn from the 2006 Canadian Travel Activities and Motivation Survey (TAMS), the current study identified five discrete rural tourism niche market groups, including agritourists (i.e., those whose primary trip purpose was to visit a farm), to determine if their demographic profiles and the benefits they sought were different. The results indicated that agritourists were not notably different from other rural tourism niche markets. The findings question the niche status of agritourism as a viable diversification strategy for struggling farm families. Hence, rather than perpetuating agritourism as a special and distinct niche market, future research should identify and explore appropriate strategies that might help farm families transition out of a predominately agrarian economy into service-based and experience-based economies.

Keywords: agritourism, rural tourism, niche markets, benefits sought

1.0 Introduction

Changes occurring in agriculture and the globalization of our food system are threatening the survival of the family farm (Brookfield, 2008; Brookfield & Parsons, 2007; Essex, Gilg, Yarwood, Smithers, & Wilson, 2005). In response to the economic turbulence resulting from these threats, farmers look to diversify their farms by adding new enterprises, thereby allowing the family to continue living and working on the land (Gasson & Errington, 1993; Haugen & Vik, 2008; Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001; Veeck, Che, & Veeck, 2006). Governments also encourage farmers to diversify into value-added products, services, and tourism (Essex et al., 2005; Gartner, 2004; Sznajder, Przezborska, & Scrimgeour, 2009; Veeck et al., 2006), and one particular rural tourism niche market—agritourism—is becoming a popular choice (Jayeff Partners, 2005; Kline, Cardenas, Leung, & Sanders, 2007; Williams, Lack, & Smith, 2004). Unfortunately, for many of the Canadian farm families embracing agritourism the transition has been based more on a leap of faith than on sound market research.

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Market research on the growth of agritourism and on visitors to Canadian agritourism enterprises has been missing from the literature. This lack of knowledge in Canada is unfortunate, because tourism market research demonstrates that the more a business knows about its consumers and develops products and services to meet their needs, the more successful the business will be (Middleton & Clarke, 2000; Oh & Schuett, 2010; Roberts & Hall, 2004). Consequently, segmenting tourists into identifiable groups or niches characterized by common, shared features is fundamental in marketing as a means to ensure the success of the tourism enterprise (Frochot, 2005; Middleton & Clarke, 2000; Park & Yoon, 2009; Roberts & Hall, 2004). Further, rather than just emphasizing places or destinations, tourism policy has moved into focusing promotions and marketing of experiences that are intended to satisfy the needs of unique and specific niche markets (Clarke, 2005; Nylander & Hall, 2005; Roberts & Hall, 2001). From the perspective of the supply side, segmenting tourists into niche markets based on the types of experiences they seek helps to differentiate the products and services among competitors (Clarke, 2005; Roberts & Hall, 2004).

Hence, an interest in determining and better understanding the agritourism niche market in Canada to inform and assist agritourism enterprises with their target marketing and product offering was the catalyst for undertaking this study. As a first step in that process, we begin by considering the broader context of tourism in rural areas.

1.1 Rural Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 1994 defined a *visitor* as anyone travelling to a place for business or pleasure other than that of his/her usual environment for less than 12 months and whose main purpose of the trip is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited (Smith, 1995; WTO, 1994). The UNWTO reserves the term *tourists* for overnight visitors, thereby excluding individuals engaging in same-day visits from being categorized as tourists. Hence, rural *tourists* are distinct from rural *visitors* in that they stay longer and, most importantly, have an expressed desire to experience an aspect of rural areas beyond a casual day trip (Timothy, 2005).

Although visiting rural areas is not a new phenomenon, the socioeconomic shift occurring in rural areas from one centred on predominately primary-sector industries (i.e., farming, fishing, mining, and forestry) to one embracing new opportunities in service- and experience-based economies has had an impact on the character of most rural areas in Western countries (Brookfield, 2008; Essex et al., 2005; Gartner, 2004). Indeed, rural tourism is being promoted as an alternative strategy of economic development in previously resource-dependent and depressed communities throughout Canada and other developed countries (Beshiri, 2005; Gartner, 2004; Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Ollenburg, 2006; Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). The growth of rural tourism has been attributed with stimulating social and economic activity and contributing to the emergence of a new rural paradigm focused on offering amenities that include leisure, tourism, and speciality food production (OECD, 2006). However, to be considered rural tourism, the products and activities need to be more than just located physically within a rural area—their inherent character needs to complement and integrate with the rural, natural surroundings (Hall & Page, 2002; Lane, 1994; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Sharpley, 2004). Although it remains difficult to define, rural tourism has grown steadily since the 1970s (Beshiri, 2005; Frochot, 2005; Hall & Page, 2002), and the demand for rural tourism experiences coincides with the advent of the independent traveller and an increased awareness of and desire for sustainable, environmentally conscious holidays and for experiences of authenticity while traveling (Gartner, 2004; Lane, 1994; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Timothy, 2005).

Given these presumed conditions, questions remain as to whether rural tourism is something special or distinct (i.e., fundamentally different from, say, ecotourism), if it is defined by the unique physical, cultural, and social setting of rural areas, or whether it is simply tourism taking place in rural locales (Frochot, 2005; Gartner, 2004; Page & Getz, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Sharpley, 2004). In an early perspective, Lane (1994) argued that in its purist form, rural tourism must comprise these features:

- located in rural areas;
- functionally rural: built upon the rural world's special features of small-scale enterprises, open spaces, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, and traditional societies and practices;
- rural in scale: both in terms of buildings and settlements and, therefore, usually small in scale; and
- traditional in character, growing slowly and organically, and connected with local families; it will often be largely controlled locally and developed for the long-term good of the area and will be of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of rural environment, economy, history, and location. (p. 14)

More recently, Roberts and Hall (2001) and Frochot (2005) raised key questions concerning "what is rural" as suggested in Lane's (1994) often-quoted foundational paper, which has informed much of the rural tourism research. The meaning of rural has become increasingly contested, given the recent transformations occurring in many rural communities (Frochot, 2005, Roberts & Hall, 2001). Nevertheless, recognizing that *rural* is distinct from *urban* and is strongly tied to geographical concepts of distance and density, as well as the socioeconomic characteristics of its residents, is important in defining and understanding *rural*. Statistics Canada, for instance, uses several different definitions of rural, but each of these emphasizes aspects based on geographical classifications (see du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2002). For our study, emphasis is placed on understanding the characteristics, activities, and distinctions among the various niche tourism markets emerging from the broader and complex concept of rural tourism rather than weighing in on the rural debate.

More recent perspectives suggest rural areas are places of consumption and are becoming extremely diverse as destinations for a wide range of different niche tourism products (Frochot, 2005; Oh & Schuett, 2010; Roberts & Hall, 2001, 2004; Sharpley, 2004; Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). Within the new rural paradigm, the emerging economic forces of which rural tourism is a part have led to consumers' perceiving, consuming, and using rural spaces to satisfy their needs and wants (Frochot, 2005; Gartner, 2004). For the consumer, rural tourism therefore becomes a state of mind, where the activities, destinations, and other tangible characteristics involved serve to define such places (Sharpley, 2004). Further, the areas where rural tourism occurs are also perceived as being safe, having solid or traditional values, being surrounded by open spaces and natural beauty, not being extensively developed, and being places where one can expect to be treated with respect and friendliness (Gartner, 2004; Lane, 1994).

By identifying niche markets that encompass these perceptions, rural tourism suppliers can segment consumers into distinct groups to more effectively and efficiently target their products and services and distinguish themselves from their competitors (Frochot, 2005; Middleton & Clarke, 2000; Roberts & Hall, 2004). For example, a wide variety of rural tourism markets has emerged that includes experiences based on farms (i.e., agritourism), as well as those based on other rural attributes, environments, or activities, such as ecotourism, hunting and angling, adventure tourism, educational travel, and cultural/heritage tourism (Beshiri, 2005; Frochot, 2005; Roberts & Hall, 2001, 2004; Sharpley, 2004). In their rural tourism segmentation study on fishing, Oh and Schuett (2010) outlined the critical need for tourism enterprises to distinguish between different segments of rural visitors and to gain detailed knowledge of their characteristics to better understand and orient their marketing efforts. Indeed, a high failure rate among new small tourism businesses has been linked to the lack of market knowledge, poor market identification, and the resultant failure to adequately reach their markets (Cook, Yale, & Marque, 2006; Oh & Schuett, 2010; Pizam & Upchurch, 2002).

Further complicating our understanding of the appeal of rural tourism is its fragmented nature, which makes the collection of solid statistics separating rural tourism from other forms of tourism difficult (Beshiri, 2005; Lane, 1994; OECD, 2006). Despite the various niches of rural tourism that can be identified, rural tourists are typically seen as homogeneous and are only distinctive when compared to other broadly defined groups of tourists. Little research has been done that examines the smaller, more specialized tourism niche markets found in rural areas that could serve to identify any differences and marketing advantages among them (Frochot, 2005; Oh & Schuett, 2010; Page & Getz, 1997; Park & Yoon, 2009). For example, are the experiences sought by agritourists decidedly different from other rural tourists, such as the weekend warriors seeking to conquer another mountain biking trail or tackle a craggy rock face? Are agritourists different from rural visitors at cultural and historical sites who are motivated by an interest in knowing how pioneers, Aboriginals, or other traditional cultures lived, or from those individuals simply trying to escape the hustle and bustle of the modern city in the idyllic countryside? Unlike agritourism, for each of these other rural tourism experiences, the appeal might simply be destinations or activities located in rural areas and not the unique and special quality of *rurality*. However, because much of the current practice tends to consider all rural tourists under one umbrella rather than separate them into specialized, smaller niche tourism markets, it is not clear if there are substantial differences in their profiles or, more critically, in the benefits they seek while on holidays in rural areas. Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine whether agritourists differ in profile and differ in the benefits they seek from other rural tourism niche markets in Canada.

1.2 Agritourism

To begin, agritourism must be characterized as distinct from other types of rural tourism, with which it has, unfortunately, often been equated (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Roberts & Hall, 2001). When viewed as synonymous with rural tourism, agritourism could be any tourism activity occurring in rural areas where agricultural production and farming occur (Barbieri

& Mshenga, 2008; Bushy & Rendle, 2000; Henderson, 2009). For instance, this view would include community-based attractions, such as farmers' markets, agricultural fairs, and culinary tourism (i.e., local food festivals or harvest celebrations), as well as activities and products offered directly on farms. A more precise view of agritourism as a niche market within rural tourism expressly requires it to be offered on working farms (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Henderson, 2009; Kline et al., 2007; McGehee & Kim, 2004). In their recent examination of agritourism, Sznajder et al. (2009) argued that three features differentiate agritourism from other types of rural tourism: (a) participation in the process of food production, (b) opportunities to learn about the lives of rural people, and (c) the possibility of direct contact with domesticated animals and the countryside. Specifically, agritourism is "the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation for enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation" (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2006, p. 98). Based on this definition, agritourism would include pick-your-own operations, farm-stays, farm demonstrations, and educational farm programs (Sznajder et al., 2009; Veeck et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2004).

Agritourism is growing as a niche market because it meets the needs of modern Canadian families. Farms are increasingly becoming attractive tourist destinations because visitors are nostalgic for a simpler time (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005; Timothy, 2005). They want to escape the hustle of the city, connect with their cultural heritage, be with family, be in a natural environment, and enjoy a richer and authentic leisure experience (Che et al., 2005; Experience Renewal Solutions, 2009; Kline et al., 2007; Oh & Schuett, 2010; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Sznajder et al., 2009). Increasingly, as food production and distribution become of greater public concern, families want their children to know where their food comes from (Sznajder et al., 2009; Veeck et al., 2006), and related concerns over food sovereignty have increased public interest in experiencing the farm (Che et al., 2005; Veeck et al., 2006). Understanding the expectations of agritourists, that is, the benefits they seek, is critical to ensuring the success of agritourism as a diversification strategy to keep the family farm viable (Haugen & Vik, 2008; Wilson, 2007). However, very little research has been undertaken to understand who visits agritourism enterprises in Canada. Market segmentation suggests that product development should go hand in hand with having a clear understanding of consumers and the benefits they seek so that products, services, and messages meet and, proprietors hope, exceed expectations (Cook et al., 2006; Middleton & Clarke, 2000). The lack of market research into Canadian agritourists has resulted in farmers' choosing to diversify into tourism based on being told of or observing the success of other farmers who have started agritourism enterprises rather than on solid market research (Roberts & Hall, 2001; Williams et al., 2004).

With appropriate knowledge of the market, diversification into agritourism has the potential to add income to the farm family's household (McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001; Williams et al., 2004). However, more so than the desire to increase economic returns, farm families may be diversifying into agritourism because of the effects of globalization on agriculture, the growth of tourism, and social motivations, such as choosing to maintain a rural lifestyle (Haugen & Vik, 2008; Ollenburg, 2006; Wilson, 2007). A leading expert on agritourism marketing, Eckert (2004) captures the essence of agritourism for the family farm as "being all about opportunity ... the opportunity to keep the family farm alive by creating new revenue streams" and a way "to keep the younger generation involved through creating new business roles and challenges" (p. 5). In fact, the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association (OFFMA), a membership-driven, direct-farm market organization, estimated that 400 farms involved in agritourism within the province in 2005 accounted for $116 million in sales (Jayeff Partners, 2005). In 2009, a subsequent study found 750 Ontario farms hosted an estimated 8 million customers annually with sales in the $210 million range (Experience Renewal Solutions, 2009).

The intersection of these many issues has given rise to an interest in better understanding Canadian agritourists and, in particular, to the purpose of determining who they are and what benefits they seek from their agritourism experiences. Some specific questions that will be addressed in support of the purpose of this study are:

- What proportion of Canadian domestic tourists can be considered agritourists?
- What is the demographic profile of agritourists?
- Do agritourists differ in profile from other rural tourism niche markets?
- What benefits sought by agritourists are most important, and are they different from the benefits sought by other rural tourism niche markets?

The next section outlines the methods we used in this exploratory study to better understand who Canadian agritourists are and the benefits they seek from their tourism experiences.

2.0 Methods

For this study, data were drawn from the 2006 Canadian Travel Activities and Motivation Survey (TAMS), the most recent survey available. The TAMS is carried out every 5 years by Statistics Canada on behalf of the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) as well as eight provincial and territorial agencies responsible for tourism. Along with details on a variety of trip characteristics, the TAMS collects information on Canadian travel destinations in the previous 2 years, participation in almost 200 different recreational and entertainment activities while travelling, and reasons for and benefits sought from travel. Using a random digit dialing protocol, the sample for the 2006 TAMS captured approximately 23,000 Canadians who completed the questionnaire, which represents a 54% response rate (Statistics Canada, 2006). Based on the UNWTO definition of a tourist, only respondents to the TAMS whose trips included an overnight stay as part of their rural tourism vacation in the past 2 years were included in this secondary-data analysis study.

2.1 Rural Tourist Groups for Comparison

Along with agritourists, four other rural tourism niche market groups were selected from the TAMS dataset for comparison purposes: rural heritage tourists, nature tourists, rural sports tourists, and rural adventure tourists. To isolate these five distinct groups of interest, those activities in which the travellers had participated during a trip taken within the 2 years prior to the survey were used to define the groups. Essentially, each group was created to represent a key niche rural tourism market typically found in rural Canada. The selection of activities representing each of the five niche markets to be compared was guided by definitions provided in the literature.

The first rural tourism group, and the one of primary interest, comprises *agritourists*. Drawing on the conceptualization and definition of agritourism offered by Che et al. (2006), agritourists comprised travellers who had, in the previous 2 years, taken a holiday to engage in such activities as visiting an entertainment farm, staying at a farm or guest ranch, participating in harvest operations, and/or picking fruit at a farm.

Travellers who formed the second group, *rural heritage tourists*, were those individuals whose activities reflected interests in heritage, cultures, and/or lifestyles different from their own (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2004). One trend in rural tourism has been the increased interest in historic buildings and traditional rural society (Lane, 1994). Therefore the activities enjoyed by this group included visits to historical sites or buildings, historical re-enactments, and archaeological sites, and/or participation in interpretative programs at heritage sites.

The *nature tourists* group was developed by including travellers who had participated in low-impact, passive activities that respected the natural environment (Fennell, 2003). In addition, nature tourism involves activities where nature and natural features are central to the activity and not an afterthought (Roberts & Hall, 2001). As such, those travellers who had participated in activities such as canoeing, hiking, or snowshoeing, as well as viewing nature, flora, wildlife, and birds, were included as part of the nature tourist group.

When creating the *rural sports tourists* group, the complexities of sport tourism had to be considered (Gibson, 2004). While acknowledging the diverse types and intensities of sport participation as well as the motives behind it, consideration here was given principally to those activities that relied on a rural locale for their expression and where there was primary participation—active engagement by the traveller—and not secondary participation, or spectatorship. Hence, rural sports tourists were those travellers who reported participating in activities such as downhill or back-country skiing, trophy, ice, or freshwater fishing, or hunting.

The final group created was *rural adventure tourists*. This group includes tourists engaging in very physical and challenging outdoor pursuits, where the rural environment becomes more like a backdrop for the undertaking of the dominant attraction (Fennell, 2003; Roberts & Hall, 2001). Weaver (2003) differentiated adventure tourism from other forms of nature-based tourism by pointing to the presence of three basic characteristics: (1) an element of risk involved, (2) higher levels of physical exertion, and (3) the need for specialized skills. Based on examples cited by Weaver, in this study rural adventure tourists were travellers who reported participating in activities such as whitewater rafting, dogsledding, rock or mountain climbing, or scuba diving, or who had used motorized recreational vehicles (i.e., snowmobiles and ATVs) or nonmotorized recreational vehicles (i.e., mountain biking).

Collectively, these five groupings or types represent travellers who had engaged in rural tourism sometime during the previous 2 years. Some of these trips might have included more than one type of rural tourism; for example, rural heritage tourists might also have engaged in activities that define the nature tourist types. When such overlaps occur, the *primary* purpose of the trip is unclear, and therefore the type of rural tourism niche market cannot be distinguished. Consequently, to ensure that the groups were mutually exclusive, only those travellers who had engaged in one form of rural tourism and none of the other four forms were included in each discrete grouping. While this constraint further reduced the overall size of the sample of rural tourists for subsequent analysis (e.g., a traveller who reported engaging in *both* rural adventure and rural sports tourism would not be included), it ensured that each group was uncontaminated by competing interests in other forms of rural tourism. Hence, comparisons between the five rural tourism niche markets were facilitated, and any differences revealed in their profiles and benefits sought could therefore be regarded as attributable to the nature and form of the specific group.

2.2 Measures and Analysis

Once the five rural tourism groups were defined, a number of factors in the TAMS dataset were selected to facilitate comparisons, with the benefits that these tourists sought while on vacation being of particular interest. The TAMS survey participants were asked to rate, using a 3-point scale (3 = *highly important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, and 1 = *of no importance*), the importance of 15 statements describing different benefits they might seek. By drawing upon literature suggesting the reasons why tourists visit agritourism enterprises and, more broadly, engage in rural tourism (e.g., Che et al., 2006; Li, Huang, & Cai, 2009; Timothy, 2005), three composite measures were created by combining 11 of the statements that captured broader dimensions of benefits sought: Family, Learning, and Relaxing. The mean score of the items making up each composite measure was calculated, with higher scores reflecting greater importance placed on the benefit sought by the travellers.

The first composite measure of benefits sought, Family, combined four items defining this dimension: “keeping family ties alive,” “having stories to talk about when back at home,” “to enrich relationships with spouse and kids,” and “to create lasting memories.” With agritourism seen as appealing to the growing family-oriented tourism market, agritourism operators believe they offer visitors a wholesome, safe environment (Che et al., 2005; Jayeff Partners, 2005). New social and family structures have emerged in recent years in part due to an increasingly urbanized society, and in response, rural areas and farms are often ascribed with the appeal of older, simpler ways of life and places having strong family values (Che et al., 2005; Sznajder et al., 2009).

The second composite measure was Learning. The Learning benefit dimension was based on four items: “seeing or doing something different,” “to gain knowledge of history, cultures or other places,” “enriching your perspective on life,” and “to stimulate your mind and be intellectually challenged.” Agritourism provides a venue for farmers to promote food production to visitors who seek both leisure and learning (Che et al., 2005). For example, some farmers seek avenues to educate consumers through their transactions, and by interacting with agritourists, farmers can inform visitors about farming lifestyles and concerns (Che et al., 2005; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson et al., 2001).

The final composite measure was Relaxing. The overscheduling and daily stressors associated with today’s hectic urban and suburban lifestyles can be set aside or resisted while on vacation. Farm vacations can provide a relaxed setting in which individuals can escape and enjoy simpler ways of living (Che et al., 2005; Veeck et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2004). In constructing this measure, Relaxing, the following statements were used: “to relax and relieve stress,” “having no fixed schedule,” and “to be pampered.”

In addition to these composite measures of benefits sought, selected demographic characteristics also were drawn from the TAMS data to compare the profiles of the rural tourism niche market groups. Factors used to develop the profile of rural tourists included sex, age, personal annual income, education, the presence of children, and place of residence. Unfortunately, the TAMS did not include questions concerning the nature of the trips, such as length of stay, party size, or expenditures, so comparisons on these key travel-related factors could not be done.

3.0 Results

The 22,683 Canadians who responded to the TAMS reported a total of 6,649 person-trips in the 2 years previous to the survey that involved at least one type of rural tourism activity. In several of these cases, the trips involved more than one type of rural tourism. The two types of rural tourism that occurred together most often were nature tourism and rural sports tourism, which represented 768 (11.6%) of all rural tourism person-trips in the previous 2 years. Other combinations of rural tourism types were person-trips involving rural heritage tourism and nature tourism (n = 374, 5.6%) and rural sport tourism and rural adventure tourism (n = 240, 3.6%). However, as these results indicate, despite expectations that different types of rural tourism would occur together on many if not most person-trips, fewer than half of all rural tourism trips taken in the 2 years prior to the survey (n = 2,788, 41.9%) involved two or more of the five tourism types. Hence, when Canadians participated in rural tourism, the majority engaged in just one discrete type.

After separating out those persons who reported engaging in more than one type of rural tourism trip, a total of 3,861 rural tourism person-trips (58.1%) were classified into just one of the five discrete types of rural tourism niche markets and these were used in the subsequent comparisons. This number represents 17.0% of all types of Canadian domestic tourists and provides an estimate of the size of the rural tourism market in 2006 (see Table 1). The largest niche market is rural sports tourists, who encompassed 37.8% of the five rural tourist types and 6.4% of the total travel market. They were closely followed by nature tourists, who made up 33.5% of the rural tourism market. Agritourists represented the smallest of the rural tourism niche markets with 4.7% of the travellers, which represents slightly less than 1% of the total travel market in Canada (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Rural Tourist Types*

Rural tourist types	n	% of all Canadian tourists	% of 5 discrete rural tourist types
Agritourists	182	0.8	4.7
Heritage tourists	674	3.0	17.5
Nature tourists	1,295	5.7	33.5
Rural sports tourists	1,460	6.4	37.8
Adventure tourists	250	1.1	6.5
Total	3,861	17.0	100.0
All tourists	22,683	100.0	

With such a small proportion of agritourists comprising the Canadian travel market, it might be difficult and costly for cash-strapped farm families to effectively market to agritourists alone. Further, one has to ask if targeting just agritourists would be a viable business decision for farm families expecting to make a decent living from tourism. Closer scrutiny of the different rural tourism niche markets revealed that only another 8.7% of *all* rural tourism trips taken in the 2 years prior to the survey involved agritourists who participated in at least one other form of rural tourism activity. Consequently, farm families with agritourism enterprises should not expect that agritourists are necessarily part of a larger or broader market engaged in two or more different forms of rural tourism. As such, understanding how agritourists might be different in their profile and expectations from other rural tourism types is particularly important if effective marketing is to be carried out.

3.1 Agritourists Compared to Other Rural Tourism Niche Markets

Several demographic characteristics were selected from the TAMS dataset to develop profiles of the five rural tourism niche markets and to facilitate comparisons. Essentially, the question is whether these five discrete types of rural tourists differ and in what ways, and in particular, whether agritourists have a different profile from tourists in other rural tourism niche markets. Beginning with gender, a higher percentage of females was among rural heritage tourists (60.5%) and nature tourists (62.5%), whereas males, perhaps not surprisingly, tended more often to be rural sports tourists (59.5%) and rural adventure tourists (52.0%) (see Table 2). Agritourists came closest to an even split between males and females, with slightly more females (53.3%) reporting agritourism travel in the previous 2 years.

With respect to rural tourists' ages, a larger percentage of agritourists (46.7%) and rural heritage tourists (48.2%) were older adults (i.e., 55 years of age or older), whereas the plurality of nature, rural sport, and rural adventure tourists was composed of middle-aged adults (35 to 54 years of age). With the exception of rural adventure tourists, the youngest travellers (under 35 years) always represented the smallest percentage of each group (see Table 2). Agritourists were most similar to rural heritage tourists in age and least similar to rural adventure tourists. As with gender, it is perhaps not surprising that more physically active pursuits, such as rural sports and rural adventure tourism, have higher percentages of relatively younger participants.

With respect to income levels, agritourists tended to have somewhat lower annual personal incomes than the other four rural tourist types. Rural sports (34.4%) and rural adventure tourists (32.9%) generally reported the highest incomes, which might be attributable to the higher costs associated with the specialized equipment, training, and travel typically required for engaging in the types of activities defining these tourist groups. Somewhat similar results were found when examining levels of education achieved by these rural tourists. A higher percentage of agritourists than any other rural tourist group reported having obtained a high-school education or less (40.8%), whereas the other four rural tourist types generally had similar profiles with respect to education. With the exception of rural adventure tourists, the highest percentage of each of the other rural tourist types had obtained at least a university degree (see Table 2).

Table 2. *A Comparison of Rural Tourist Types by Selected Demographic Characteristics*

Characteristic Attribute	Rural tourist types (%) Agritourists (n = 182)	Rural Heritage (n = 674)	Nature (n = 1,295)	Rural sport (n = 1,460)	Rural Adventure (n = 250)
Sex					
Male	46.7	39.5	37.5	59.5	52.0
Female	53.3	60.5	62.5	40.5	48.0
	$\chi^2 = 155.727$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$				
Age					
Young adults	17.0	14.5	23.6	23.0	28.0
Middle-aged adults	36.3	37.2	45.1	50.4	58.8
Older adults	46.7	48.2	31.3	26.6	13.2
	$\chi^2 = 164.644$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$				
Income					
Under $40,000	34.6	22.1	24.2	16.1	19.1
$40,000 to $59,999	23.1	22.0	21.3	17.3	16.4
$60,000 to $79,999	13.5	18.1	19.7	18.0	14.7
$80,000 to $99,999	10.3	12.8	13.2	14.1	16.9
$100,000 and over	18.6	25.0	21.6	34.4	32.9
	$\chi^2 = 99.256$, $df = 16$, $p < .001$				
Education					
High school or less	40.8	29.6	26.4	33.5	29.6
Post high school diploma	32.4	30.6	30.0	30.1	41.3
University degree	26.8	39.8	43.6	36.4	29.1
	$\chi^2 = 49.883$, $df = 8$, $p < .001$				
Children					
Children (12 years or younger)	17.7	8.9	18.8	22.0	25.8
None/older children	82.3	91.1	81.2	78.0	74.2
	$\chi^2 = 60.917$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$				
Region					
Maritimes	7.1	6.1	7.3	3.8	8.4
Québec	22.0	18.7	17.1	20.8	21.2
Ontario	31.3	39.6	34.6	34.2	31.6
Prairies	30.2	20.3	28.1	29.0	25.2
British Columbia	9.3	15.3	13.0	12.3	13.6
	$\chi^2 = 51.148$, $df = 16$, $p < .001$				

Given that extent literature suggests agritourism experiences are opportunities for families to connect with each other while on vacation (Che et al., 2005; Sznajder et al., 2009), we might expect a higher percentage of agritourists to have dependent children 12 years of age or younger. However, in comparison to the other four rural tourism types, agritourists were not as likely to have dependent children (17.7%) than any of the other groups, except rural heritage tourists (8.9%). While this finding is perhaps surprising, the results are consistent with the finding that agritourists and rural heritage tourists were generally older adults, and if they had children, they may be older than 12 years of age.

Finally, we compared agritourists to the other rural tourist types based on the region of the country in which they lived. The distribution of each of the rural tourism types was quite similar in all regions, with Ontario and the Prairie provinces (i.e., Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) consistently reporting the highest percentage of all types. The prevalence of agritourists from Ontario and the Prairies may reflect strong, traditional ties to agriculture as well as greater support for agritourism farm diversification and government-sponsored marketing initiatives, especially in Alberta, where overnight ranch holidays are a well-developed and promoted tourism product.

Overall, the differences among the five rural tourism niche market groups on these selected characteristics are not compelling. Even though they are *statistically* different on all of the factors, a careful inspection of the distributions within each characteristic suggests that these differences might not be *practically* significant in differentiating rural tourists. In other words, despite small to notable differences in the percentages of rural tourist types that compose each category of these characteristics, the highest and lowest percentages are relatively consistent for all groups. Apart from some variations that might be attributable more to the nature of the activities in which the tourists are participating than to a primary interest in rural areas (e.g., younger, more affluent travellers composing the rural sports and rural adventure tourist groups), the patterns revealed in these comparisons suggest greater similarity among the rural tourism types than differences.

3.2 Benefits Sought by Rural Tourists

In the process of exploring the differences that might exist among discrete rural tourism types, the benefits they associate with rural tourism are of particular interest. More so than a demographic profile, understanding differences in the expectations tourists have for their travel experiences is critical to developing effective marketing strategies. In the case of these discrete rural tourist types, overall they placed similar levels of importance on all three of the benefit dimensions, with the Family benefit dimension given marginally greater importance ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .45$) than Relaxing ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .46$) and Learning ($M = 2.18$, $SD = .48$). The mean scores and distributions suggest that these three benefit dimensions appear to be genuinely and equally important for all rural tourists.

Given the presumed link between benefits sought, as they were defined here, and the nature of the experience offered by agritourism enterprises, agritourists were expected to place higher levels of importance on all benefit measures, especially on the Family and Learning benefits, than the other rural tourist types. However, following a comparison of agritourists to the other rural tourist types, no significant differences were revealed among the groups in the importance placed on the Family benefit ($F_{4,3617} = 1.248$, $p = .288$), and even though there were significant differences among the groups on the Learning benefit ($F_{4,3618} = 49.686$, $p < .001$), agritourists placed *less* importance on Learning than did both rural heritage and nature tourists (see Table 3). Finally, rural heritage tourists and nature tourists placed less importance on Relaxing than the other rural tourist types, including agritourists, and although the differences are significant ($F_{4,3632} = 7.352$, $p < .001$), they are not especially compelling, as the lowest levels reported still reflected a degree of importance being placed on this benefit.

Table 3. *A Comparison of Benefits Sought by Rural Tourist Types*

		Benefit dimension*		
Rural tourist types	*n*	Family	Learning	Relaxing
Agritourists	165	2.24	2.16[ab]	2.29[a]
Heritage tourists	629	2.25	2.37[c]	2.17[b]
Nature tourists	1,240	2.22	2.21[b]	2.18[b]
Rural sports tourists	1,373	2.21	2.08[a]	2.24[ab]
Adventure tourists	237	2.27	2.07[a]	2.30[a]
Overall	3,644	2.23	2.18	2.21
F-ratio		1.248	49.686	7.352
p		.288	< .001	< .001

*Benefit dimensions measured on 3-point index ranging from 1 = *of no importance* to 3 = *of great importance.*

Note. Superscripts indicate groups that are significantly different based on Scheffé post hoc analysis ($p < .05$).

These results indicate that rural tourists of all types appear to place similar importance on all three benefit dimensions. Indeed, agritourists are not distinctive in ascribing more importance to Family and Learning benefits from their rural tourism experiences as anticipated. Combined with the results of the comparisons on their demographic profiles, one might question whether continued efforts to further segment rural tourism markets into unique or specialized niches warrant special attention.

4.0 Discussion and Conclusions

Even though this study set out the circumstances to allow the unique characteristics of agritourists to be revealed, what we actually found was that this niche market was not so different from the other four types of rural tourism types we created using the TAMS dataset. In terms of their demographic profile, agritourists appeared to be somewhat older, less affluent, and less well educated, and particularly likely to live in Ontario and the Prairie provinces. Overall, however, upon scrutiny of their distributions across categories of the selected demographic characteristics, agritourists were quite similar to the other rural tourism types. Hence, our results should raise concerns about the potential of agritourism as a viable niche; in other words, can we, with confidence, assume that agritourists represent a distinct subgroup of rural tourists that could be usefully segmented based on selected demographic characteristics? For example, according to Roberts and Hall (2004), a distinguishing characteristic of a niche is that its products are priced at a premium, thereby giving an above-average profit margin. However, if agritourists are generally less affluent, then the value assigned to experiencing the farm is a critical consideration. Can an agritourism operator expect an above-average profit return from tourism in comparison to other economic options possible on the farm? Many farmers who start agritourism enterprises undervalue their products and services, perhaps in part from not knowing their new consumer base, but also from perpetuating the lowest-price mentality dominating modern agriculture (Brookfield & Parsons, 2007; Essex et al., 2005). Undertaking more in-depth market research specific to agritourism would provide farmers with information and knowledge about visitors. This information and knowledge could inform agritourism operators of the scope of products, services, and experiences that agritourists desire and seek and better assess the potential and willingness of agritourists to pay for those benefits.

The results of our study also challenge the commonly held perceptions that agritourism is family focused (Che et al., 2005, 2006; Jayeff Partners, 2005; Kline et al., 2007; Nickerson et al., 2001; Veeck et al., 2006). Agritourists were not at all different from the other rural tourism types in the importance they placed on the Family benefit of their rural tourism experience. Perhaps the connection to agritourism has less to do directly with benefits for the family and more to do with a family *connection* to rural areas and farming in particular. With more detailed knowledge about agritourists beyond their demographic profiles, we might discover that they have rural roots, either as current rural residents or as having grown up on farms. Certainly, further market research that includes information such as family history and travel-party composition, as well as information that would reveal whether such connections exist, would be beneficial. With the depopulation of rural areas over the past half century, the growing disconnect from the farm in our society might now present new opportunities for farmers to invite paying visitors onto the farm, whereas in the past individuals were more apt to simply visit family or relatives who farmed (Roberts & Hall, 2001; Wilson, 2007).

Not only were agritourists indistinguishable from the other rural tourism types in the importance they placed on the Family benefit of their experience, but they were not notably distinct in the importance they placed on the Learning and Relaxing benefits. Despite significant differences among *some* of the rural tourism types on these other two benefits (e.g., between rural heritage tourists and the other groups on the Learning benefit), agritourists were in fact quite similar to most of the other rural niche markets in the importance they placed on these aspects. These results suggest that, even on those dimensions strongly associated with the nature of the agritourism experience, agritourists are not markedly distinct in the benefits they seek. It must be acknowledged, of course, that in using secondary data provided by the TAMS, we are restricted to just those benefit dimensions prescribed in the original study, and there are many other benefits that agritourists might seek that would distinguish them as a unique segment within the rural tourism market. Further, the participants in the TAMS were asked to indicate the importance of these benefits in terms of their general travel preferences rather than link them directly to a specific type of trip. Consequently, even though individuals may seek specific benefits from their travel, those preferences might not be directly related to the most recent trip and the activities in which they engaged. In future research, respondents should be asked about their *most recent* travel experience, in what activities they engaged (or prefer to have engaged), and what they sought from their experience (Arimond, Achenreiner, & Elfessi, 2003). Ideally, in undertaking market research with agritourists directly, some of the limitations identified here with using secondary data could be overcome.

The conclusions of our study are made even more important when one considers how small the agritourism market is in Canada. If it is not a distinct and viable niche market within rural tourism, then any investment in trying to attract such a small segment might be wasted; in other words, when considering criteria for effectively segmenting markets, agritourism may be too small and not sufficiently distinct to make it efficient to reach with cost-effective marketing practices (Cook et al., 2006; Middleton & Clarke, 2000; Smith, 1995). Consequently, our results may challenge some of the rhetoric appearing in the literature and echoed by government policy and programs encouraging farm families to diversify into agritourism. In fact, a debate within the literature continues to argue against creating niches or special-interest tourism as an approach to rural tourism development (Gartner, 2004; Roberts & Hall, 2004; Sharpley, 2004). The debate is based in part on the argument that niches make arbitrary distinctions between groups where no conceptual or practical differences exist, and tourists might not think of themselves as subgroups driven by "specific or unique" attributes (Frochet, 2005; Gartner, 2004).

What, then, do the results suggest might be an appropriate, alternative response? While there might be no competitive advantage for farms to market just to agritourists, perhaps there is an opportunity to potentially draw other rural tourist types to the farm. If, in fact, agritourism is part of a broader travel experience in rural areas, then we might need to look more closely at multipurpose tourism and understand how important the agritourism component is and where and how it fits into the mix of the tourist's total experience. Roberts and Hall (2004) argued that the application of niche marketing in rural contexts may be inappropriate, due to its encouraging local competition rather than collaboration critical for developing a coherent rural tourism experience. After all, the various rural tourism niche markets considered here did in fact place similar, higher levels of emphasis on all three benefit dimensions for the rural travel experience. Also, we might ask, are agritourists as a group solely composed of persons on extended holidays or do visitors to farms include a significant number of same-day visitors or even local residents, who might constitute a more important, emerging consumer base for farmers than agritourists?

Having said this, there is definitely a need for future research to verify the preliminary observations found in our exploratory study. Further, subsequent research should focus specifically on agritourism operators and their customers to get a clearer appreciation for who is visiting, what type of farm experiences are being offered, and what other benefits visitors to farms might be seeking. Our findings have suggested that agritourists are not dramatically different from other rural tourism groups, and closer scrutiny of the visitors to farms might reveal a broader market. Hence, further market research involving all types of visitors to farms open to the general public would benefit farm families operating agritourism enterprises when developing their marketing and business plans. In addition, the information gained would be a first step in helping to identify and explore appropriate strategies to facilitate the transition of family farms out of a predominately agrarian economy into the service-based and experience-based economies in the new rural paradigm.

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