

# Agritourism in Cross-Border Iberian Regions

Subjects: Geography

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Areas with low levels of transformation are alternative destinations for tourists who prefer to visit nonmassified places and have singular experiences. The benefits of these microdestinations are their local populations, traditional products, landscapes, and heritage, which, in turn, allow the cultural and gastronomic roots to be witnessed. Based on this assumption, researchers investigated landscape preferences to determine the agritourism potential in the Tejo/Tajo International Transboundary Biosphere Reserve (Portugal/Spain), where Dehesa/Montado and traditional olive groves play important economic and sociocultural roles.

Keywords: agricultural landscape ; agritourism ; Biosphere Reserve

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## 1. Introduction

European policy has led to profound changes in rural areas. Since the 1980s, the valorization of a multifunctional vision of agriculture has been signaled through the expansion of its food production functions and nonagricultural activities <sup>[1]</sup>. This vision offers a way to design and implement strategies to enhance rural tourism and strengthen the role of agriculture. At the same time, farmers are local actors in the rural economy <sup>[2]</sup>, and farms gain new dimensions, including nature and landscape management, the promotion of educational activities (e.g., agricultural education), the reinforcement of short food chains (e.g., through direct sales), the promotion and valorization of the tourism sector (e.g., agritourism), and the incentivization of the dynamics of social agriculture (e.g., therapies, rehabilitation). In parallel, trends towards healthier and more sustainable food consumption have become more prevalent <sup>[3]</sup>, accompanied by lifestyles featuring increasing connections with nature and new relationships with the rural environment <sup>[4]</sup>. These trends have triggered tourism offers based on the great diversity of resources, especially those based on nature, local lifestyles, and the rural culture and its eno-gastronomic products. In fact, tourism in rural areas has grown due to its potential for territorial development, contributing to the resilience of low-density territories <sup>[5][6][7]</sup>.

In the context of the Iberian Peninsula, before the COVID 19 pandemic, rural tourism was growing and being consolidated <sup>[8]</sup>. However, in the year 2020, which was marked by a recession for demand, despite difficulties, rural tourism modalities became more appetizing <sup>[9]</sup>. Farms also showed great resilience <sup>[10]</sup> in terms of both food production by continuing to innovate supply chains through the strengthening of e-commerce and through offers of agritourism services <sup>[11]</sup>.

In the context of the different modalities of rural tourism, agritourism presents itself as a way to contribute favorably to local development dynamics and may play an active role in the green economic transition process. It is in this context that farmers are facing a change in role—from food producer to landscape conservationist—as well being considered drivers of the new dynamics of local entrepreneurship and innovation.

The development of rural tourism in the Iberian Peninsula happened at different speeds. However, in the 1980s, agritourism emerged as a survival strategy for farms <sup>[12]</sup>. Some examples with more stabilized markets are widely known, such as the Jaén Region in Spain, where olive oil is one of the main tourist attractions. This landscape provides a huge range of products and services related to oleotourism to the market <sup>[13]</sup>. Another interesting region in the wine tourism market is delimited by the Douro River. Human and natural heritage are intertwined in this landscape in the aromas, knowledges, and flavors present, representing authentic reservoirs of traditions, culture, and heritage. Both examples are cultural landscapes with the UNESCO-protected classification, where agriculture activity plays a key role in terms of its contribution to the preservation of gastronomic traditions, nature, and values associated with more sustainable production. In this territory, traditional landscapes, composed of many natural and artificial elements, such as fields, meadows, orchards, hedges, pastures, terraces, forested areas, tourist infrastructures, and farm buildings that tell the story of the human–nature relationship, are prominent.

However, the physical constraints and successive social, cultural, and economic influences may threaten the preservation of the natural and cultural values associated with the landscape. In this context, the Convention Concerning the Protection

of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (WHC) was launched in 1972 <sup>[14]</sup> to protect, conserve, and preserve the cultural heritage associated with landscapes. This provided an opportunity to enhance the material heritage as well as the immaterial value. Later, in 2002, the Budapest Declaration <sup>[15]</sup> defined the importance of landscape planning and management through policies linking protected areas to their economic and social activities. In this context, the traditional agricultural and agroforestry landscapes of UNESCO are characterized by low-intensity land use that has multifunctionality and enhances ecosystem services <sup>[16]</sup>.

In 2016, the Tejo/Tajo International Transboundary Biosphere Reserve was developed with the mission of preserving agroecosystems. The cultural value of this territory is due to its low density and cross-border territory factors that contribute to its high patrimonial value <sup>[17]</sup>, as well as to the preservation of genuine landscapes <sup>[18]</sup>.

It is possible to highlight some ongoing actions that have been put in place by the local governance, particularly those dedicated to landscape enhancement actions. For example, the municipality of Idanha-a-Nova joined the International Network of Eco Regions (INNER), which is governed by the principles associated with the active promotion of territorial food systems based on family farming and sustainable production modes that promote biodiversity, traditional knowledge, and healthy diets <sup>[19]</sup>. The management of the Tejo/Tajo International Transboundary Biosphere Reserve has been promoting a set of activities that enhance touristic experiences of natural landscapes, as well as showing the value of local products. These dynamics are expressed at the level of territory qualification through new infrastructures, new tourism products, or actions of territory communication, affirming the position of the area as a gastronomic destination <sup>[20]</sup>.

## **2. Agritourism in Cross-Border Iberian Regions**

Studies on the agricultural landscape have been gaining interest in the literature <sup>[20][21][22][23][24]</sup>, and rural heritage has also become a study subject <sup>[10][25]</sup>. In parallel, the multifunctionality of agricultural landscapes, seen as a tool to develop the economy of rural areas <sup>[26][27][28]</sup>, as well as an instrument that links sustainable agriculture, food security, and territorial balance <sup>[29]</sup>, is valued in the literature as a way to promote rural identity <sup>[30]</sup>. This perspective is supported by the ability of agricultural landscapes to simultaneously maintain their primary functions of food production, landscape preservation, the provision of environmental services, and viability across a wide range of activities in rural areas <sup>[10]</sup>.

The complexity of interconnections between the landscape and tourism has given rise to different approaches in the literature, ranging from the combination of agriculture and rural development <sup>[31]</sup>, the landscape, and gastronomic tourism <sup>[7]</sup>, tourism and its impact on protected natural areas <sup>[32]</sup>, and to agriculture and creative tourism <sup>[33]</sup>.

Several investigations have analyzed the potential and benefits of using the agricultural landscape as a tourism resource by exploring the potential of agri-food products (from olive oil <sup>[34][35][36]</sup> to wine <sup>[37][38][39]</sup> or cheese <sup>[40]</sup>), the local heritage and culture <sup>[26][33]</sup>, the role of sustainable agriculture in enhancing ecosystems <sup>[41]</sup>, and the impacts of tourism on farms and territorial development <sup>[10]</sup>.

This topic is explored little in the literature. However, it is recognized that the people are engaged with the landscapes and are heavily influenced by land cover, specially Mediterranean landscapes <sup>[42]</sup>, with positive influence on human well-being <sup>[23]</sup>. The literature argues that the extensive production models promote the biodiversity and its aesthetical value <sup>[43]</sup>. These are important characteristics that are valued and recognized as a touristic resources <sup>[44]</sup>.

The literature has demonstrated the importance of knowing the values, perceptions, and preferences of a population and incorporating their opinions into decision-making processes <sup>[42]</sup>. In fact, farmers and the rural community are essential actors in the process of activity diversification, especially considering the multifunctionality of rural landscapes. Due to this, it is important to understand the motivations of a rural community for the development of effective rural tourism strategies <sup>[2]</sup>, and activities that promote contact with tourists should be prioritized <sup>[45]</sup>. In general, the literature suggests that rural communities are likely to support tourism initiatives in their territories in a positive way <sup>[46]</sup>. However, it is also essential to know the opinions of tourists, both when designing tourism strategies in rural areas, as well when promoting the destinations, to project their expectations into innovative rural experiences with added value <sup>[47]</sup>. According to a previous study, the perception of the landscape is different between the local population and tourists. The latter group tends to valorize more the agricultural landscape <sup>[48]</sup>.

The recognition of the cultural landscape by UNESCO has brought up the opportunity for public recognition of the importance of sustainable practices and appreciation of traditional know-how <sup>[49]</sup>, and at the same time, an opportunity for its valorization has emerged. The literature also recognizes that Mediterranean landscapes, where ecological values and territorial identity prevail, are examples of landscapes that should be protected, both for their contribution to the well-being of the population <sup>[50]</sup> and their potential as tourism resources <sup>[51]</sup>. Expressions of preference for Mediterranean landscapes

are often guided by ecological criteria, as in the case of Dehesa/Montado or the strong cultural and symbolic identity associated with olive groves [42]. In contrast, the threat of intensive agriculture or forestry production systems and the abandonment of agroforestry activities is endangering sustainability, compromising the well-being of local populations, and affecting touristic flow [23]. The literature also supports the idea that tourism in agricultural landscapes where sustainability values prevail encourages the adoption of healthier lifestyles [52]. Thus, experiences in rural environments that provide contact with extensive agriculture systems favor the development of sustainable tourism.

The typology of tourism that benefits the farm economy is agritourism [5][52]. Many studies have focused their attention on the positive impact of agritourism in encouraging the adoption of good sustainable management practices associated with natural and cultural heritage and positive socioeconomic repercussions on rural communities [53][54][55]. However, in the literature, there are several articles on the stabilization of the concept [56][57][58]. These are divided between those showing associations with direct contact with agriculture [59] and those showing mere associations with the observation and enjoyment of rural traditions [59][60]. This ambiguity of the concept [61] is particularly due to the following factors [56][57][61][62]: the uncertainty regarding the environments in which this type of tourism takes place (rural areas, farms, markets or fairs of agri-food products); the authenticity of the experience (staged activity related to agriculture vs. authentic agricultural activity); the nature of the contact with the agricultural activity (observation vs. participation in agricultural activities); and the characteristics of the recreational activities provided (farm stay, educational activities, agricultural activities, gastronomy). Despite this complexity, there seems to be some consensus in the identification of tourism initiatives based on agricultural activities that configure the concept of agritourism, which researchers highlight as an example:

- The recreational activities scene is closely linked to agricultural production [63];
- An authentic experience is one that allows a learning experience [64] through contact with nature and the territory [65];
- The inclusion of accommodation, food, recreational activities, and learning experiences increase the level of contact with local products and authentic agriculture [65][66].

This conceptual ambiguity has led to the existence of diverse agritourism activities, sometimes distorting the context of the relationship with the rural landscape, agriculture, and gastronomy itself, causing it to be confused with the concept of rural tourism [64]. However, the literature reinforces that the aesthetic value of the landscape has a positive influence on tourist experiences [67]. At the same time, contact with agriculture provides sensory, educational, and recreational experiences with enormous potential to change individual behaviors, particularly by promoting healthier and more sustainable daily habits [68].

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