

Rural Tourism Destination

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Rural tourism is considered a high potential form of tourism, enhanced by the demand for more sustainable and nature-based solutions, and able to contribute to territory resilience. A rural area is not necessarily a tourist destination, but it might become one, if agricultural enterprises are willing to diversify their economic activities by investing in rural tourism, and local actors provide active support and co-participation.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, European and Italian rural areas have experienced a deep change characterized by the need for a multifunctional vision of agriculture, reconnecting agricultural activities to society and generating economic opportunities for rural communities. This vision has been opening the way for nontraditional strategies to sustain rural communities, and in particular for rural tourism and related entrepreneurial opportunities ^[1]. It has strengthened the role of farms as central players in the local rural economy and tourism development, expanding their objectives. In fact, farms (are expected to) become a place where several activities occur alongside agricultural production. Examples include: educational activities (e.g., farm education, agricultural daycare), short food chain (e.g., direct sales), tourism (e.g., agritourism), etc.

This development has been supported by the European Union agricultural policy, which has been following the growing demand for healthier and more sustainable consumption and a slower lifestyle to rediscover the relationship between rural areas and society. Therefore, a specific goal for modern rural farms is the agritourism business. The UNWTO defines rural tourism as “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally related to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: (i) low population density, (ii) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry, and (iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle” ^[2]. Hence, rural tourism is one of the forms of tourism with high potential, as it contributes to rural areas’ resilience, and stimulates local economic growth.

In the Italian context, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the agritourism sector had a fundamental role in maintenance and development of rural areas, under various aspects: social, economic and productive, landscape and environmental, local, and cultural. Becoming a structured component of the Italian tourism offer in 2019, there were 24,576 agritourism farms with 285,027 beds (5.5% of the total number of beds in Italy), while there were 3.8 million arrivals, contributing 2.9% of the arrivals of Italian tourism ^[3].

The development of multi-functionality in agriculture has allowed Italy to continue its modernization process. The year 2020 will be remembered as a year of profound transition, in society, in market, and in particular in the tourism market due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A period of crisis, certainly, but also a year of profound structural evolution in supply and demand. Rural tourism has not escaped the contraction of the market, but many farms showed strong reactive ability to face this sudden and unexpected event. In this context, some reflection on the role and future of the agritourism sector is needed to understand the future evolution of rural areas. The EU aims at reducing the environmental footprint of food systems and strengthening resilience against crises. Agritourism activities might play a crucial role in this strategy, since a relevant part of the path towards green transition and biodiversity pass from the farmer vocation to sustainability, their commitment to safeguard the environment and landscapes, and their leading role in local farming and direct sales. Hence, rural tourism might be a strategic driver for further development of rural areas. However, the creation of a governance capable of putting local actors and local capital into a system, and thus ensuring balance among production, consumption, and value creation, is needed for the final success of this initiative.

In Italy, the development of rural tourism has occurred unevenly among the various Italian regions. Liguria is one of the smallest regions in Italy, bathed by the Ligurian Sea and dominated by the Ligurian Alps and the Ligurian Apennines. Local heritage is very rich in terms of tourism attractions, such as natural sites and historical cities ^{[4][5]}, and it is famous all over the world for its wonderful Cinque Terre ^[6], a UNESCO site. At the same time, the Liguria region is a very fragile area with high hydrogeological risks; therefore, it should be managed in a caring manner, in order to preserve its cultural, natural, and historical heritage ^{[7][8][9]}.

As a tourism destination, the Liguria region has traditionally been centered on seaside tourism, mainly characterized by mass tourism ^[10], and it has been suffering from the competition of other national and international destinations. Recently, the regional governance that manages regional tourism policies and strategies launched a program oriented at diversifying the tourist offer, evidencing the main role of an enhancement of the hinterland areas of Liguria. Thus, rural tourism may become one of the tourist drivers to recover this Italian tourist destination.

In this context, the opinion and vision of farmers willing to engage in multifunctional initiatives is a fundamental perspective that needs to be taken into consideration, as it might help to indicate the direction for future changes in the local agritourism strategy. The involvement of these stakeholders is a new phenomenon for the area under study, since in the past they were barely (or in the worst case not) included in the definition of tourism policies. In this sense, this study intends to help fill this gap. Therefore, the study aims to achieve a common path shared by this specific type of stakeholders through a three-step mixed methodological approach, in which the expert panel and questionnaire (step 1) collected information which served as a base for individual semi-structured interviews (step 2) and the Nominal Group Technique (step 3), useful for stimulating sharing of ideas and active participation in the definition of local rural tourism policies.

2. History and Development

Nowadays, tourism is a key component of many countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and thus it is not surprising that policy makers point at the tourism industry as one of the main pillars of sustainable development.

In recent decades, there was an increase in urban population with excessive land consumption. Therefore, management of urban and rural heritage becomes a priority, and agricultural multi-functionality may be a tool with beneficial effects on the local economy ^[11], hence the increasing attention of policy makers, and academia alike, on rural tourism and the role that it can play in territorial development. Many questions arise about the potential and benefits, both at the regional and national level, of rural tourism, and the strategies for developing rural tourism are investigated by extant literature. For example, many studies focus their attention on the positive impact of the development of agritourism activities in stimulating the adoption of sustainable best practices that could favor the improvement of natural heritage and the positive socio-economic repercussions on local communities ^{[12][13][14]}. Other scholars focus more on specific initiatives, as demonstrated by the rising interest in Nature-Based Solutions (NBS). These solutions aim at managing the natural and cultural heritage, in order to improve environmental and life quality in cities and villages, in urban and rural areas, as well as the quality of tourism services ^{[15][16][17][18]}.

Rural tourism is characterized by four key aspects: location, sustainable development, community-based characteristics, and experiences ^[19].

In terms of location, the potential of the rural landscape in various areas (such as ecology, food production, culture, and tourism) suggests an opportunity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by rural development, as well as being useful to reduce the problem of depopulation of rural areas ^[20].

A specific tool to support rural development is agritourism, which can balance the needs of rural communities and those of tourists, by offering real opportunities for economic and social development and at the same time mitigating undesired impacts, especially of an environmental type ^{[21][22]}. Hence, agritourism is an important way to diversify agriculture and rural areas, and it is part of the idea of sustainable and multifunctional agriculture, as it enables to use productive resources in the countryside and creates an additional source of income for both farmers and the local community ^{[23][24][25]}.

Farms in rural areas have gradually seen an increase in the diversification of activities by the implementation of multi-functionality: tourism has become a very important asset for several farmhouses, for example culinary tourism, which is an element of tourist attraction and an important factor for improving rural tourism and local development ^[26]. Farmers are essential actors for the objective of planning diversification of activities in the light of multi-functionality: their reluctance is bound to reduce the impact and set limits to the pursuit of tourism diversification. That is why a thorough understanding of farmers' attitudes toward rural tourism and its deployment is fundamental for drawing rural tourism development policies ^[27]. Agritourism and related farmers, which in most cases are small businesses, must use existing resources in order to develop effective tourism strategies, considering that rural tourism is based on generosity and strong emotional relationships between guests and hosts, developing "philoxenia" (love for each other) and/or "nurturing nostalgia" ^{[28][29][30]}. To this scope, the organizational value of entrepreneurs (in this case, farmers) consists in their capability of participating and collaborating, since a community approach to tourism development is key for the success of rural tourism destination development ^[1].

Innovative concepts such as "corporate social responsibility (CSR)" and "circular economy" are (more and more) also integrated into the rural tourism sector. The CSR approach is an important element for reaching the goal of multidimensional

sustainability in rural tourism activities [31]: rural tourism should conduct to circular economy initiatives capable of ensuring a balance between consumption and reproduction of collective rural resources through collaboration among local actors [32][33].

Among community-based actions for successfully enhancing rural tourism local stakeholders to be proactive in their attitude and behaviors, in order to ensure a profitable position within a related field of activity, is the application of methodical marketing strategies [34]. Hence, one of the first steps in developing a rural tourist destination is the identification of the main stakeholders who might take part in the planning and implementation of tourism policies and strategies at the local level. Whilst supportive municipalities should act as facilitators for business development [35], innovative stakeholders might be requested to push the rural tourism destination towards success, for example by ensuring the right level of digitalization of the tourism services offered. Indeed, digital transformation of rural tourism can be seen as a way to solve socio-economic challenges in rural societies [36], even in terms of sustainability [37]. Accommodation management should be operated by online tools such as Instagram, Facebook, and/or specialized websites to match tourist demand with the offer by agritourism operators [38][39], since lack of online services hinders rural tourism promotion and development [40]. Updated information technologies might help with increasing the popularity of rural tourist destinations; at the same time, these technologies should always guarantee an equilibrium in local tourism development in order to avoid negative externalities [21][41]. Furthermore, digitalization and related collected data could provide information useful for increasing the attractiveness of tourist destinations [21][41], designing a more precise profile of potential tourists and figuring out their expectations in terms of rural experience.

Lastly, the development of rural tourism passes through the experience offered and its perceived quality. Some studies evidenced that the agritourism sector needs to improve visitor profiling in order to enhance its tourism offer [42] and the accessibility of rural tourism destinations [43]. Moreover, tourists' perceptions should be based on social, emotional, and symbolic interaction with local stakeholders, so as to improve the rural experience and generate positive tourist satisfaction [44]. In this sense, memorable experiences should be proposed with the aim to feed a positive word of mouth and thus enhance local rural tourism [45]. Therefore, farmers themselves, with the support of local communities as facilitators, should increase the attractiveness of their rural destinations, reinforcing "hard" (tourist infrastructures and accommodation) and "soft" services (range of activities and special events) [35][46].

Various stakeholders, e.g., tour operators [47], policy makers [48][49], tourists/local players [50][51][52][53], should be involved in developing and reinforcing a rural tourism destination. More specifically, rural stakeholder networks, with public/private partnerships, coordinated both horizontally and vertically, are essential to make rural tourism development policies effective [54][55].

Exploring the relationships among local stakeholders in rural tourism, some authors evidenced the importance of building local networks [56], the residents' influence on tourism policies [57][58], and the connection of local communities to the networks [59][60][61], via consultation between public authorities and other stakeholders, as a critical factor of success in the development of the rural touristic destination [62][63].

In all cases, a specific critical issue in planning rural tourism policies is the relationship among stakeholders: since it is very important for local development and rural tourism, it should be investigated, e.g., in terms of habits of cooperation, structure of relationships, and perception of the importance of local networks [64] and their specific characteristics, considering that there are relevant differences among them [65]. Some factors, such as communication, resource sharing, and social interaction, should be considered, so as to facilitate and consolidate the creation of local stakeholders' networks [66][67].

Moreover, identification of the various roles and responsibilities among actors as well as definition of the factors influencing policy makers in designing a local identity are fundamental for the implementation of an effective rural tourism system [68][69][70][71]. Therefore, farmers' opinions are needed in order to develop a rural tourism destination; in certain local contexts, they can even stimulate local tourism activities [34]. Furthermore, some authors highlighted that the role of farmers, supported by association with local communities, is very important in terms of local management, since it should allow for effective use of rural heritage resources and ensure sustainability of rural settlements over time [72][73].

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