

Agritourism and Mental-Health in Korea

Subjects: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism | Others

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Green-space exposure can play a crucial role in promoting the health and wellbeing of people. Agritourism is a unique 'experience' or 'activity' that can allow urban dwellers to participate and reconnect to nature through agriculture on a working farm. Moreover, visiting rural green spaces gives a chance to forget the hectic urban life; it allows the tourist to focus on their own and society's general wellbeing. Agritourism activities can provide the feel of connection with nature and offer visitors the nostalgia of a "quiet" traditional life. Visiting agritourism sites and engaging in the associated activities can improve the perceived immediate mood. In addition, perceived wellbeing might contribute to such immediate mood-boosting.

Keywords: agritourism ; mental health ; farm tourism ; psychological effects ; mood boost

1. Green Environments and Mental Health

Searching in green-based tourism journals, we found that much research has been conducted from different perspectives on this and related issues. Some studies explored broad perspectives of the impacts of rural tourism on quality of life ^{[1][2]} or on life satisfaction due to the holiday experience ^[3]. In contrast, some studies focused on specific tourism behaviour ^[2] or from the perspective of medical issue examinations ^{[4][5]}. The main focus, however, has been on outdoor activities emphasising personal growth and self-discovery ^[6].

It is essential to note the specific positive factors contributing to physical activity, social interaction, or a combination of different activities ^[7]. The health benefits can combine physiological and psychological health. Access, quantity, and types of green areas were mentioned as contributing factors to mental health benefits ^[8]. Three behavioural mechanisms have been involved ^[9]. The type of contact to the environment ^[10], the opportunity for social contact to improve mood and stress level ^[11], and the environmental design in creating conditions 'attractive enough to recover from demanding situations of urban lifestyle' ^[12].

Miller et al. (2008) investigated the contribution of parks and protected areas to human health and wellbeing. They classified the associated wellbeing as physical, mental, spiritual, social, and environmental, and in each context, they mentioned the relevant benefits at various levels ^{[13][14]}. Some studies mentioned the increased approval of nature protection by green spaces' visitors ^{[15][16]}. Several studies revealed increased group cohesion ^{[17][18]} and more pro-social behaviour ^[19]. From the perspectives of the mental and spiritual benefits, the health effects of green resources tourism include the feeling of a more positive self-concept and increased self-esteem ^{[20][21][22]}.

Two beneficial mental health effects were repeatedly mentioned: enhancement in wellbeing ^[7] and reduction in stress ^{[9][23][24]}. Two studies targeted children in their research. They found that the amount of nature in people's environments had a strong relationship with depression and anxiety disorder and confirmed its impact on decreasing stress ^{[25][26]}. Thompson et al. confirmed the link between more green space and less stress in deprived communities ^[9] and social tourists who received financial support ^[27]. Similar results were found for young adults ^[14]. The quantity of visiting green spaces effective in the reported stress-related illnesses (the number of times people visit and the duration of their park visits) ^[23] and the quality and success of a green-based program can increase self-efficacy, mindfulness, and subjective wellbeing. It may reduce feelings of time pressure and mental stress ^[14]. The positive contribution of green-based leisure time is important for both long vacations ^[1] and for short visits longer than 20 minutes ^[7].

Wendelboe-Nelson et al. (2019) investigated the context of green-space exposure and its association with mental health wellbeing through a scoping review approach. They note that different green spaces (e.g., recreational, residential, urban, or rural) may affect mental health well-being differently ^[28]. Therefore, studying agritourism as a new beneficial environment for mental health, with different functions and activities, might affect new contexts.

2. Mental Health: Well-Being, Stress

Based on the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition, mental health is not only the absence of mental disorders but also has a broader state of subjective wellbeing, comprising physical, mental, and social wellbeing factors. The WHO has emphasised the effective functioning of time spent in the countryside for both the individual and the community, allowing individuals to realise their abilities, cope with the everyday stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to their community [29]. Although the definition presented by WHO is still the main reference to describe mental health, there is no universal definition of mental health wellbeing, which makes it difficult for researchers in this subject. A review study on the wellbeing outcomes of green-space exposure suggested a definition of mental health wellbeing as a starting point in which wellbeing incorporates more social aspects and the potential of individuals rather than physical health [28]. There is also a translation problem; it is sometimes difficult to find an appropriate comparable synonym when wellbeing is translated into other languages [30].

In social and behavioural science, researchers need to prove reliability and validity when measuring mental health; therefore, it is recommended to apply the standard models [28].

Wellbeing can often be described in terms of happiness, which is a fundamental goal of society [31]. The literature on subjective wellbeing broadly differentiates long-term life satisfaction from short-term emotional wellbeing [14][32]. Stress, the other core variable in this study, is regarded as one of the most critical factors in evaluating mental health in modern society [23]. Stress is considered a type of adjustment activated by physical or psychological tensions [33]. Contact with nature and relieving stress has been practically shown to have a significant relationship [28]. However, there is no homogeneous result regarding green spaces and the mental health relationship [26].

Living conditions and environments support mental health since these two factors allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles [19]. However, it is not easy to consider all the contextual factors that might affect mental health wellbeing outcomes due to the lack of information [28].

3. Agritourism in Korea

South Korea is a high per capita GDP country with a dynamic and flourishing economy; however, an unbalanced growth strategy was adopted to modernise the economy quickly. It seems that the achievements have been at a high cost to environmental health and the imbalance between urban and rural development [34]. Due to such rapid transformation, rural and urban areas suffered from socio-economic problems [35]. It led to high levels of stress and life dissatisfaction in the metropolitan area, especially among the young generation [36].

In the fourth national territorial plan (2000 to 2020), the government's main focus was to launch strategies that could eliminate gaps between urban and rural areas by diversifying rural economic activities, establishing a regional innovation system, and encouraging rural-urban interactions. Hence, the plan has been to develop rural areas through innovative activities, specifically, encouraging farm diversification through tourism activities. Farms Tour appeared as a new concept, with activity farming-experience centres, restaurants, resorts, and accommodations for visitors. Later the new policy changed and focused on cooperation and community-based business. Nowadays, agritourism in South Korea includes cooperatively developed farm tourism by at least five households [37].

The government supports agritourism as a rural tourism project, especially "rural theme villages", the promotion of organic farming, and encouraging engagement in harvesting events [31][38].

Given the contemporary situation in South Korea and the proven relationship between green-resources tourism with some aspects of mental health, it was hypothesised that:

- Agritourism activities might contribute to improve the immediate mood and further improve mental health.

To our knowledge, there has been no study to find evidence of the agritourism benefits of mental health. This research aimed to test which, if any, mental health benefits are related to agritourism experiences. Two dimensions of mental health were at the core of this research: perceived wellbeing and perceived stress. It was hypothesised that:

- There might be an interaction between self-reported wellbeing and agritourism.
 - There might be an interaction between self-reported stress and agritourism.
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