

## AGRITOURISM IN PERI-URBAN AREAS: LESSONS FROM A *VEGETABLE TOURISM* INITIATIVE IN THE BAIX LLOBREGAT AGRARIAN PARK (CATALONIA)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Although it might seem self-evident that peri-urban areas can play a pivotal role in the leisure activities of urban residents, they have not received much academic attention. This seems to be because the literature has typically focused on four main types of tourism destinations or activities — urban or metropolitan; rural; coastal or ‘sun and sand’; and natural or mountain areas (see Hall and Page, 2002 or Vera, 1997) — and peri-urban areas do not fit neatly into any one them. Against this background, this paper examines a peri-urban tourist initiative launched in 2008 in the Baix Llobregat Agrarian Park (BLAP) in Catalonia. The park lies on the southern fringe of Barcelona, but within its metropolitan area (5 million inhabitants in 2010), where it is surrounded by several towns. The initiative represents an attempt at promoting what in Catalan is known as *holeritisme*, derived from the Latin word *holus* meaning ‘vegetable’; hence, a literal translation would be ‘vegetable tourism’.

The paper begins by examining the particular nature of peri-urban agriculture, the economic activity characterizing the BLAP area. It then presents a literature review of the types of tourism associated with peri-urban agriculture, namely peri-urban tourism and agritourism. This background is completed with a description of an integrative model of what might be understood by ‘peri-urban agritourism’. The case study of the Baix Llobregat Agrarian Park is then presented and the *vegetable tourism* initiative is explained in the light of comments obtained from interviewing two of its promoters (BLAP staff). That said, the tourist experience is assessed by analysing the data obtained in a consumer satisfaction survey. Finally, the initiative is appraised in relation to the earlier theoretical discussion, and the multiple possibilities of peri-urban areas for tourism are examined.

## 2. PERI-URBAN AGRICULTURE

Historically, cities have been linked directly with their surrounding agricultural areas, which provide them with fresh food. With the improvement of transport systems, however, these close ties have been partially lost. Moreover, the encroachment onto the farmlands by city sprawl has led to a significant contraction of peri-urban agriculture.

Peri-urban agriculture was firstly analysed in scientific terms by von Thünen, who described the agricultural intensity around cities as being predictably higher. Subsequent studies were devoted to detecting the particular nature of this type of agriculture, frequently inspired by von Thünen's postulates. Since the 1960s we have seen an emerging body of literature consolidating the study of peri-urban agriculture, culminating in Bryant and Johnston's (1992) handbook on agriculture in the city's countryside. Generally speaking, this literature has upheld a largely 'negative thesis' in the sense that peri-urban agriculture is often perceived as being inevitably exposed to urban expansion and as such it has tended to seek to quantify the resulting loss of farmland.

However, as Paül and McKenzie (2010) claim, there has been a shift in the literature on peri-urban agriculture over the last decade in both developing and developed countries. In the case of the latter, what is usually highlighted are the savings to be made from the avoidance of transportation costs, given the proximity of peri-urban agriculture to urban markets. This, in turn, has direct consequences in terms of reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, by preserving peri-urban agriculture, the landscapes of metropolitan areas and their biodiversity can be maintained. In this emerging 'positive approximation' to peri-urban agriculture, tourism is often seen as a crucial element.

## 3. APPLICABLE TYPES OF TOURISM

Firstly, based on the agricultural characteristics of the case study area, agritourism is perhaps the obvious tourist activity to exploit. However, the coincidence of agriculture and tourism in the same area does not automatically result in agritourism. Indeed, agritourism and rural tourism are not interchangeable practices (Rodil, 2009; Ivars, 2000). Agri-tourism can basically be defined as any tourist activity undertaken on a farm (Phillip, Hunter and Blackstock, 2010). However, on these farms tourism must be a secondary activity, while the main activity must remain farming itself. Thus, the tourist activities offered must be consistent with agriculture and might include visits to farms, working on farms, tasting products, attending workshops using commodities produced on the farms, pick-your-own facilities, etc.

Secondly, based on the peri-urban location of the case study area, peri-urban tourism is perhaps the obvious tourist activity to exploit. Most of the research on tourism in peri-urban areas has focused on residential activities for urban dwellers, mostly for weekend use (secondary residences). Different typologies of peri-urban tourism have been proposed, including distinctions between intensive and extensive activities (Lazzarotti, 2005; Bryant, Russwurm and McLellan, 1982), on the one hand, and between consumer profiles (Bryant, Russwurm and McLellan, 1982), on the other.

Finally, a conceptual, integrated model of peri-urban agritourism can be built by combining the criteria used in defining agritourism and peri-urban tourism. Here, the usual

leisure activities conducted in areas around cities, even if carried out in farmland areas, are not considered part of peri-urban agritourism, since it specifically requires the direct involvement of a farm. The model clearly specifies that provision of accommodation does not necessarily form part of peri-urban agritourism, which is consistent with a broader understanding of tourism that embraces all the activities that visitors can engage in when outside their homes, including accommodation or not (Serra, 2002). Indeed, tourist facilities such as hotels are typically absent in peri-urban farmland (and farms that offer accommodation services are likewise unusual) and, generally speaking, these areas are not considered ‘attractive’ enough for overnight stays.

#### 4. THE BAIX LLOBREGAT AGRARIAN PARK

The Baix Llobregat Agrarian Park constitutes a protected farmland precinct covering 3,300 hectares in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. There are approximately 600 holdings with 1,200 farm owners and workers. In general, commodities produced in the area are sold through wholesale outlets, which means that most of the BLAP farmers lose any marketing control over their fresh vegetable produce. Likewise, local consumers cannot identify BLAP vegetables when buying at suburban markets or supermarkets. In response to this situation, the BLAP management body has begun to develop a strategy to help farmers connect directly with metropolitan consumers. The *vegetable tourism* initiative is part of this strategy.

The BLAP has a land use plan (passed in 2004), as well as its own management plan (passed in 2002), which includes in part certain measures of public use and tourism. Since 1998 the management of the area is in the hands of a consortium or body comprising four layers of government (fourteen municipal councils, the district council, the provincial council and the Catalan government), but importantly the main farmers’ union in Catalonia (*Unió de Pagesos*) is also a constitutive member of the consortium. The direct involvement of farmers in the management body guarantees that decisions are taken with their active participation. The BLAP consortium is a flexible body, complex in terms of managing such a varied number of partners, but effective in developing policies made by multiple actors.

Today, many leisure activities (jogging, walking, cycling, etc.) are practiced in the park area, attracting thousands of metropolitan residents on a daily basis. Thus, the area is under intensive pressure from people visiting the park but without their having any real interest in agriculture. While there are no official statistics of this leisure use, simple observation suggests the figure to be huge. At the same time, it should be noted that the BLAP does little to facilitate these activities (for instance, it has not erected any signposts for walkers), but still they are practiced.

Finally, this description of the BLAP should stress that the precinct contains 2,000 hectares of prime and highly fertile farmland extending over the delta and lower valley of the Llobregat River, together with its associated tangible and intangible heritage linked to the historic colonisation of this area (principally in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), as in many of the other *huertas* (orchards) along the Mediterranean coast (Romero, 2009). The Llobregat River supplies water through a channel network to these farmlands, whose main commodities are vegetables (artichokes, lettuce, chard) and fruit (peaches, plums, cherries). The artichoke

is the preeminent produce, and is in the process of obtaining a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) through the European Union labelling schemes.

In 2003 the BLAP launched a campaign called ‘Tastes from the Orchard’ (*Els sabors de l'horta* in Catalan) to encourage local restaurants to use BLAP products. From an initial number of 15 restaurants this had expanded to 36 in the 2010 campaign. Similarly, in 2005 a campaign (*Pota blava a la carta*) was launched to promote the *pota blava* chicken (PGI-labelled) and to encourage restaurants to include it on their menus.

## 5. THE VEGETABLE TOURISM INITIATIVE

After several years of campaigning in restaurants (including ‘Tastes from the Orchard’ and ‘*Pota blava a la carta*’), in 2008 the BLAP staff decided to seek additional ways to promote the products of the area. The idea they came up with involved the development of peri-urban tourist activities centred on the agricultural character of the park. This is the point of departure for their *vegetable tourism* initiative. In 2009 the first visits were organised. Typically, the *vegetable tourism* experience includes the following day package of activities: a tour round a farm, a guided visit of a museum exhibition in Can Comas (the BLAP headquarters), a cooking and tasting workshop, and a restaurant meal centred on local produce.

The activities are currently planned around two products: in the winter, artichokes, and at the end of spring, cherries. In order to complete the annual cycle, there are plans to introduce activities around leafy green vegetables (chard, lettuce, celery, spinach, etc.) and fruit (plums and peaches). The aim is to have a specific activity for each season so that consumers appreciate the natural cycle of agricultural production and that products are available only in a specific period of the year — that is, to ‘re-seasonalise’ a consumer who is perceived as being ‘de-seasonalised’. The overriding motive is the conviction of BLAP staff members that if peri-urban agriculture is to have a future then it must be clearly differentiated from the agriculture being practiced elsewhere. This differentiation, they argue, can be achieved by promoting natural methods of production (organic farming, if possible) and by avoiding artificial procedures to produce crops ‘out of season’ and unsustainable transport costs, and, hence, by introducing short supply chains (SSC). Reflecting this desire to reintroduce the seasonal nature of farming, the campaign drawn up to promote *vegetable tourism* is called ‘It’s the season for ...’ (*Arriba el temps de...* in Catalan).

Importantly, the activities are always accompanied by a brief explanation on a webpage designed by the BLAP <<http://www.elcampacasa.com/>> where consumers can find which commodities are produced by which farmer, where they are located and where the products are sold. It is hoped that this website will allow consumers and farmers to keep in contact after the day of the *vegetable tourism* experience.

## 6. ASSESSING VEGETABLE TOURISM: A CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

The survey was conducted in February and March 2010 among 470 individuals, yielding a 95% confidence level and a 4.51% absolute error. The main aim of the survey was

to assess the customers' level of knowledge of *vegetable tourism*, as well as its success. In addition, it provided details regarding (i) consumer profiles, (ii) the reasons motivating consumers to purchase the *vegetable tourism* experience, and (iii) the price consumers are prepared to pay for this tourist service.

Most of those polled acknowledged that while no strict definition of *vegetable tourism* had been offered during the visit, around 70% of them were able to provide a good or fairly good definition of it. As for their willingness to purchase artichokes after the experience, 85% said that they were; significantly, this figure exceeded the percentage of those claiming to have known about the product before the visit (76%). Interestingly, in terms of the demand profile almost all the consumers were residents of the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Three quarters of the visitors polled stated that their main motive for visiting the park was to find out more about the work of the BLAP and its chief product (the artichoke), while less than a quarter claimed to be there for purposes of tourism or leisure. When asked how much they would be willing to pay for the tourist experience, only 15% said more than €20. €15 is the price that the BLAP calculates as its cost per head for offering the service, which means that to make any profit they would have to charge more than this price.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that the individuals who buy into the *vegetable tourism* experience are not 'typical' mainstream peri-urban tourists that tend to show little interest in the agricultural nature of the area and who are content just to seek out leisure activities, but rather they are fully conscious consumers with an awareness of the vital importance of agriculture for the area. This is a key finding confirming that, among the vast array of possibilities afforded by peri-urban leisure and tourism and identified in the literature (see, among others, Bryant, Russwurm and McLellan, 1982; Shaw and Williams, 2002; and Lazzarotti, 2005), there is a place for a specific offer and demand centred on farming in the city's countryside.

However, the results presented in relation to costs reveal a scarcely favourable scenario for the introduction of a private operator on a franchise basis, as intended by the BLAP. To date, the service has been managed by the BLAP, which partially subsidises the costs since the *vegetable tourism* programme has been designed as a promotional campaign. If consumers are not willing to spend more than €20 a head for this day's experience, it is unlikely that a competitive company will be able to offer the service. Be this as it may, the BLAP contends that the success of the experience cannot be measured in terms of the economic sustainability of the tourist activity itself, but rather by considering the farmers' long-term returns, i.e. the increase in the number of consumers who know about their products and buy them directly from them – in other words, restoring the direct link and trust between farmers and consumers. In this respect, there is a markedly positive correlation between the dates on which the *vegetable tourism* experiences are organised and the number of people accessing the website <<http://www.elcampacasa.com/>>, which is obviously a positive outcome from the perspective of the BLAP.

Although in strictly economic terms failing to cover the costs of the tourist services would not seem to make good business sense, agritourism does ensure the sustainability

of the farm as a whole. This means that the farm continues to operate as a working farm, with *vegetable tourism* contributing positively in this sense by increasing demand for the commodities produced on it. Thus, as discussed above, agritourism upholds the farm's main activity (namely agriculture) but, by the same measure, agritourism does not seek to substitute agriculture with tourism.

To sum up, the theoretical model designed for peri-urban agritourism has been tested in the case study area and it can be concluded that the *vegetable tourism* experience is fully consistent with the concept. The initiative presents all the characteristics of a peri-urban tourist activity, being located in a peri-urban area and maintaining clearly defined links with urban demand (its visitors originating from the metropolitan area itself). Furthermore, as outlined, it presents all the characteristics of an agritourism activity, clarifying the continuing confusion in Spain as regards the distinctions between rural tourism and agritourism (Rodil, 2009).

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