



## **Farms for Fun in the Philippines: Opportunities, Challenges, and Ways Forward**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Farm tourism in the Philippines is a thriving sector that allows visitors to immerse themselves in rural life, traditional farming practices, and associated cultural heritage. This paper presents the outcome of a study conducted in the Southern Luzon region of the Philippines popularly known as CALABARZON. It involved secondary data analysis, surveys, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with owners, managers, and operators of farm tourism destinations accredited by the Department of Tourism (DOT) Philippines. The study was commissioned by the DOT Regional Office IV-A to the author, and was done to provide insights into the status of farm tourism in the region, identify areas for improvement, and prepare a Regional Farm Tourism Strategic Action Plan. Anchored on the tourism marketing and promotion campaigns that are centered on the "It's More Fun in the Philippines" and "Fun Farms" slogans, the DOT has significantly propelled the farm tourism industry by enhancing brand awareness and attracting more visitors. Likewise, the paper proposes sustainable farm tourism destination criteria to guide policy development, capacity-building, and the establishment of industry standards, ensuring the long-term viability of such sites while promoting environmentally responsible practices and sustainability. With effective policies, strategies, and initiatives, the Philippines has the potential to become a leading farm tourism destination in the ASEAN region. By harnessing the opportunities offered by farm tourism, the government and various stakeholders can further stimulate tourism industry growth and foster inclusive and sustainable development in rural communities.*

Keywords: agritourism, farm tourism, Philippines

### **INTRODUCTION**

Farm tourism has been internationally acknowledged as a catalyst for promoting sustainable farm practices while generating additional sources of income for farmers and rural communities through tourism. Alternately called rural tourism, farm tourism has been defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle and culture, angling, and sightseeing." In the ASEAN region, the farm tourism sector is sometimes lumped with "ecotourism" as both sectors are sharing the ultimate objective of conserving nature and natural landscapes (Sunkar, *et. al.*, 2013).

Farm tourism in the Philippines traces its roots to “agritourism” through a joint program of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Department of Tourism (DOT) in 1999. The country's diverse agricultural landscapes, tropical climate, and rich cultural heritage make it an ideal destination for farm tourism. By 2004, the provinces of Laguna, La Union, and Davao have experienced significant growth in farm tourism, with visitor numbers increasing by approximately 157% in 2017 (SEARCA, 2018). In 2018 alone, farm tourism generated Php2.4 billion (US\$48.4 million), contributing to job creation and rural development, as highlighted in a survey by the Philippine Statistics Authority and the DOT. Of late, during the recent Tourism Stakeholders' National Summit held in March 2023, the DOT reported exceeding the target revenue by 38.06%, boosting the country's GDP to an estimated Php214 billion (US\$4.2 billion) (Mondares and Israel, 2023).

As farm tourism in the Philippines involves farm tours, farm stays, fruit and vegetable picking, animal feeding, and cultural excursions, visitors can immerse themselves in traditional farming practices, taste local cuisine, and gain insight into the daily lives of Filipino farmers. Recognizing the industry's potential, the DOT has been actively promoting farm tourism as a sustainable form of tourism that benefits both tourists and farmers.

## **Tourism policies**

Republic Act No. 9593 otherwise known as the “Tourism Act of 2009” was signed into law by then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on 12 May 2009. It aims to promote sustainable tourism development by enhancing tourism services, improving tourist destinations, and boosting competitiveness. The law recognizes the tourism industry's significance for employment, foreign exchange, and government revenue. It establishes the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority and the Tourism Promotions Board as key government agencies responsible for industry development and marketing. Through financial support and incentives, the law has contributed to industry growth, increased visitor numbers, generated employment, and raised government revenue. It has also fostered sustainable tourism, preserving natural and cultural heritage for future generations (DOT, 2019).

Likewise, Republic Act 10816 or the Farm Tourism Development Act of 2016 was enacted as it sees a great potential for farm tourism in the Philippines in terms of economic growth, rural development, and cultural preservation. The law leverages agriculture and tourism to attract visitors, generate income for farmers, and showcase their products. The establishment of the Farm Tourism Development Board ensures collaborative policymaking and support for farmers. The Act promotes sustainable tourism practices, providing experiential learning opportunities while preserving the environment and culture. Overall, the Act offers a comprehensive framework for integrating agriculture and tourism, benefiting both sectors.

## **National Tourism Development Plans**

### **1. NTDP 2016 to 2022**

The National Tourism Development Plan (NTDP) 2016-2022 was a comprehensive roadmap aiming to promote the growth and development of the tourism industry in the Philippines. Its objectives include enhancing governance, improving visitor services, diversifying products and markets, building human capital, and encouraging sustainable development. The plan focuses on improving connectivity, developing new destinations, and creating diverse tourism products. It also aims to increase tourists' length of stay and spending while improving service quality and amenities.

### **2. NTDP 2023-2028**

The current NTDP, which was publicly unveiled on 15 March 2023 by Tourism Secretary Christina Garcia Frasco, provides a revised roadmap for an industry that is innovative, inclusive, and globally competitive. The NTDP for 2023–2028 has identified seven main objectives: 1. Improvement of tourism infrastructure and accessibility; 2. Cohesive and comprehensive digitalization and connectivity; 3. Enhancement of the overall tourist experience; 4. Equalization of tourism product development and promotion; 5. Diversification

of the tourism portfolio through multidimensional tourism; 6. Maximization of domestic and international tourism; and 7. Strengthening tourism governance through close collaborations with national and local stakeholders (DOT, 2023).

### **Tourism campaigns**

In 2012, the DOT launched a revitalized tourism campaign titled "It's More Fun in the Philippines." It highlighted the country's natural and cultural areas as destinations with friendly people, showcasing unique experiences through various media channels (Philippines Star, 2019). It underlined that the people are the most effective "agents" of their tourism marketing and promotions campaign.

The campaign achieved its goals with increased tourist arrivals, higher revenue, and improved brand awareness. According to the National Competitiveness Council Philippines, tourist arrivals in the country went up by 17.5% to 411,064 in January 2013 from 349,713 recorded in 2011. Moreover, based on the Visitors Arrival Report by DOT in 2019, the country had 8,260,913 visitor arrivals which is up by 15.24% compared to 7,168,467 in 2018 (Philippine Star, 2019). It hit the target that was set in the National Tourism Development Plan 2016-2022 and the largest visitor volume in December with 776,798 arrivals. Lastly, DOT recorded the highest growth of visitor arrival in August 2019 with 27.54% (DOT, 2019).

The campaign's messaging around Filipinos' fun-loving nature and integrated marketing approach earned industry recognition. Overall, the campaign's success can be attributed to capturing the essence of the country and showcasing its unique offerings.

Furthermore, the subsequent "More Fun Awaits in the Philippines" campaign also effectively promoted the country as a top travel destination in Asia. It showcased the country's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and hospitality, featuring various travel experiences. The campaign utilized social media, television, and print, partnering with influencers to create media buzz. The DOT's initiatives to improve infrastructure and services also contributed to its success. The campaign increased international tourist arrivals by 7.7% in 2018 (DOT, 2018). Tourists appreciated the friendly people, beautiful beaches, and unique cultural experiences. Overall, it effectively highlighted the Philippines as a top Asian travel destination.

After the massive disruptions in global tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the DOT has shifted its focus on the recovery of the tourism sector through the promotion of domestic tourism specifically nature-based travels. With the increased promotion of domestic tourism and farm tourism in the Philippines, the DOT launched "future farms" campaign in June 2022, which aims to "redevelop tourism products and seek out new types of destinations and activities for travelers in the new normal." The campaign was implemented with a collection of videos featuring farms that possess distinctive qualities of a "future farm." These farms are characterized by their innovation, scenic beauty, emphasis on high-quality products, and utilization of modern machinery (DOT, 2022).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper draws insights from the 2019 Regional Farm Tourism Strategic Action Plan (RFTSAP) Project commissioned by the DOT to the author. It utilizes secondary data from published sources to explore the status of farm tourism in the Southern Tagalog region popularly called CALABARZON. The study involves farm owners, operators, managers, and tourism officers, using methods like farm inspections, surveys, and FGDs. The exercise also covers the determination of visitation and travel motivations, target markets, information sources for visitors, and the present condition and future aspirations of farm tourism, such as planning, infrastructure, product development, marketing, agri-fishery, human resources, tourism standards, investment promotion, financing incentives, and institutional support.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Situational analysis**

The DOT Regional Office IV-A or CALABARZON region was the first among the regional offices to respond to the call of the DOT central office to prepare for their respective Regional Farm Tourism Strategic Action Plan (RFTSAP) in 2019. Aligned with the National Tourism Development Plan and R.A. 10816, the plan should focus on four objectives: product development, access and connectivity, marketing and promotion, and an enabling environment with the end in view of unlocking the potential of the farm tourism industry that would benefit rural communities. It called for innovative farm tourism products, improved packaging, better access and connectivity, and enhanced marketing efforts. Furthermore, the plan should emphasize partnerships, favorable policies, and capacity-building for stakeholders.

As a planning tool, RFTSAP focuses on collecting information relevant to the community's farm tourism practices, covering both internal and external factors that influence the farm tourism industry. These factors encompass environmental resources and conditions, community dynamics, their present conditions and future aspirations, economic and political landscapes, as well as destination analysis. Additionally, the data collection process which uses SWOT analysis and FGDs, explores perceived motivations, target markets, and sources of information for visitors.

The CALABARZON region consists of five provinces: Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon. It has a total land area of 1,622,861 hectares and abundant water resources for agriculture. Based on the RFTSAP, the region boasts of 29 accredited farm tourism sites spread across its provinces, with Batangas, Cavite, Laguna, Quezon, and Rizal hosting them. The presence of nine freshwater lakes contributes to the diverse landscapes offered by the farm tourism industry. Despite a decrease in farm area, the region has experienced a 36% increase in the number of farms since 2012, making farm tourism a significant nature-based tourism product.

### Market analysis

According to a self-administered survey, the top farm tourism products offered by farm tourism sites are herbs and vegetables (15.0%), fruits in season (6.67%), and day tour-related activities (5%) (see Table 1). As for accommodations, visitors are provided with camping or glamping (27.03%), hotels (21.62%), or farm-style accommodations (21.62%). Farm operators also offer various amenities to their visitors, including reliable power supply (54.17%), access to their water source (31.58%), some even having deep wells (31.58%), and telecommunication signals and WiFi (26.67%).

The FGD revealed that the perceived reasons why people visit farm tourism destinations are to have a memorable and lifetime experience, relax and rest, learn about nature, build and strengthen relationships, and experience adventure. The perceived target markets of the farm tourism players are adults (36–65 years old), young professionals (younger than 35 years old), and college students. The top three sources of information for their visitors are Facebook, word of mouth, and brochures and leaflets, which can guide marketing promotion efforts to focus on the most cost-effective and efficient medium. The detailed ranking of the sources of information for the visitors can be viewed in Table 3.

Based on data gathered during the RFTSAP exercise, the tourist arrivals in CALABARZON provinces total 58,729,532 with Rizal topping the list with 14,899,360 visitors. The data on farm tourism however cannot be separately classified due to a lack of data specific to farm tourism.

Table 1. Top products offered by accredited farm tourism sites in CALABARZON.

Product	Frequency	Percentage
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Herbs and vegetables	9	15.00%
Fruits in season	4	6.67%
Day tour related activities	3	5.00%
Free range chicken and eggs	2	3.33%
Venue for seminars, meetings, retreats, field trips, teambuilding	2	3.33%
Organic fertilizers	2	3.33%
Vermicast	2	3.33%
Seeds/planting materials	2	3.33%
Cosmetics	2	3.33%
Marketing strategy	2	3.33%
Lettuce	2	3.33%
Livestock	2	3.33%
Honey bee and bee byproducts	2	3.33%

Table 2. Tourist arrivals in CALABARZON Region 2016-2018

Years	Visitors		Total	Growth Rate
	Overnight	Same day		
2016	5,095,059	26,042,637	31,139,712	-
2017	5,131,743	28,052,398	33,186,158	6.57%
2018	7,489,563	51,237,951	58,729,532	76.97%

Table 3. Distribution of tourist arrivals in CALABARZON provinces in 2018

Rank	Province	Arrivals
1	Rizal	14,899,360
2	Batangas	11,453,062
3	Quezon	10,989,183
4	Laguna	7,717,709
5	Cavite	6,153,361

Table 4. Source of information about farm tourism in the region

Source of information	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	20	11.83%
Word of mouth	18	10.65%

Brochures/leaflets	16	9.47%
Directional/road signs	15	8.88%
Website	14	8.28%
Instagram	14	8.28%
Mass media	14	8.28%
Festivals and special events	14	8.28%
DOT materials	14	8.28%
Travel tours and trade fairs	12	7.10%
Travel package	9	5.33%
Twitter	5	2.96%
ATI 's group messengers and emails	3	1.78%
Travel agencies	1	0.59%
<b>Total</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

During the consultation workshop held for the development of the RFTSAP 2019, participants also highlighted several key opportunities for farm tourism. These opportunities involved fostering partnerships among local and national agencies, raising awareness about tourism products and attractions, and establishing standardized protocols and standards across both levels of government. It was observed that political differences often prioritize land conversion and development over the value of agriculture, which poses a challenge to the growth of farm tourism.

The consultation and planning exercises also identified specific weaknesses within the CALABARZON farm tourism sector. These weaknesses encompassed inadequate water supply, the need for capacity building among farm staff and tour guides, and the importance of instilling values formation among farmers. These elements were recognized as crucial for ensuring the industry's growth and stability.

Furthermore, identified threats to the farm tourism sector included intense competition among different farm sites, the presence of unaccredited farm tourism sites, and the negative impact of cost and regulatory restrictions. These factors were acknowledged as potentially detrimental to the profitability of farm sites.

Overall, the consultation workshop shed light on various opportunities, weaknesses, and threats facing the farm tourism industry. Addressing these issues would significantly contribute to the industry's prosperity and sustainability.

### **Assessment of the factors in tourism development or 5As of Tourism**

The 5 As of Tourism Framework, conceptualized by the author, was used to assess key factors in tourism development. The 5As stands for Attractions, Activities, Accessibility, Amenities, and Accommodation. Attractions focus on unique features that attract tourists while Activities cover allowable leisure opportunities for tourists within the given attraction. Accessibility refers to travel modes to and within a destination while Amenities encompass supporting infrastructure, facilities and services to make visitation safe, convenient and educational. Lastly, Accommodation addresses the range and quality of lodging options. These framework and tourism development factors draw inspiration from the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria on destination developed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC, 2019). Considering these factors helps destinations enhance their tourism offerings and attract more visitors.

Applying the 5 As framework in the case of CALABARZON in the RFTSAP, it can be noted that the region showed strength through its proximity to Metro Manila with a huge market of travelers who want to get in touch with nature with their family and friends on weekends or brief holidays. The region's vast agricultural products such as herbs, vegetables, fruits, and other delicacies and services as well as available day tour-related activities and farm-style accommodations, attracted a number of tourists. More so, the region's various cultural, historical, and other nature-based destinations offered unlimited opportunities for tourists.

Farm tourism in the region emerged as a favorable channel, boosting income and ensuring ecological sustainability. This confirmed the observations from an earlier study conducted in Batangas province on the positive socio-economic effects of farm tourism on residents without any adverse environmental impact (Recio, B.V. L., *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, in nearby Quezon province, that study emphasized the importance of farmer education for agricultural production and the need to prioritize assessments of tourist demand.

Furthermore, farm tourism in the Philippines stands as a sustainable tourism sector, supporting income generation, biodiversity conservation, social change, and preservation of cultural heritage (Yamagishi *et al.*, 2021). Ongoing marketing and promotion efforts, such as the DOT's digital campaign in 2022, provide opportunities for farmers to optimize land utilization, create employment, and offer tourists new destinations and tourism experiences.

Integrating tourism and agriculture presents a promising avenue for unlocking job opportunities, augmenting income, mitigating poverty, and upgrading urban challenges. Furthermore, tourism serves as a facilitator for knowledge dissemination, particularly among the youth demographic, and promotes the transfer of technological advancements. Notably, farm tourism not only yields health and environmental shares but also champions concepts such as organic agriculture and the adoption of safer food and water practices by avoiding the use of pesticides and chemicals. Such endeavors position farm tourism as a catalyst for heritage conservation and ecological examination, deeply rooted in the archives of Philippine history where agriculture played a pivotal role in the country's societal fabric.

The sector is anticipated to yield positive results since it is expected that the overall tourism sector's recovery would lead to growth around the globe. As revealed by the latest UNWTO tourism data, there were 235 million visitors worldwide in the first three months of 2023, more than twice as many as during the same time period in 2022. International arrivals have reached 80% of pre-pandemic levels, thus making the tourism industry resilient (UNWTO, 2023).

With the results obtained from the self-administered survey and FGDs, a Sustainable Farm Tourism Destination Criteria were proposed, and requirements which involved the following: 1) attractions; 2) activities; 3) accommodation; 4) access; 5) site management; 6) environment concerns; 7) safety and security; 8) education and interpretation; and 9) community partnerships and networks. The proposed tourism destination criteria (Table 5) are based on the themes of sustainable management; socio-economic impacts; cultural impacts; and environmental impacts.

Table 5. Proposed sustainable farm tourism destination criteria and requirements

Criteria	Standard requirements
Attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature, natural ecosystems and natural resources elements</li> <li>• Diverse and unique habitat and ecosystems</li> <li>• Endangered species of wild flora and fauna</li> <li>• Unique geologic and geographical features like mountains, hills, rivers, waterfalls, scenic views, etc.</li> </ul>
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned and controlled</li> <li>• Appropriate and compatible tourism activities to the farm and rural setting (eg. organic farming, edible landscaping)</li> <li>• Minimal negative impact to the environment</li> <li>• Safe to visitors /zero liability</li> </ul>
Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farm stays</li> <li>• Dormitory, Backpackers' inn</li> <li>• B &amp; B</li> <li>• Tents /Campsite</li> <li>• Glamping</li> </ul>
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travelable via bus and UVs</li> <li>• Adequate and clear directional signage</li> <li>• Safe passage/ drive through</li> </ul>
Site management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear entry requirements</li> <li>• Visitor trails/ routes</li> <li>• Capacity development programs for staff</li> <li>• Visitor data collection and database</li> </ul>
Environmental concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoning plans to contain visitor activities</li> <li>• Impact assessment</li> <li>• Management control to avoid negative impacts</li> <li>• Use of energy saving devices</li> <li>• Use of renewable energy</li> <li>• Waste management</li> <li>• Tangible steps and contributions to biodiversity conservation and environmental protection</li> </ul>
Safety and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency plan</li> <li>• Trained emergency response teams</li> <li>• Communication tools and systems</li> <li>• Signage</li> </ul>
Education and interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visitor welcome briefings</li> <li>• Reception center and information booths</li> <li>• Trained tour guides and interpreters</li> <li>• Educational and advocacy materials</li> </ul>
Community partnerships and networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local employment</li> <li>• Suppliers of raw materials, ingredients</li> </ul>

Source: Regional Farm Tourism Strategic Action Plan (2019)

## CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

Despite the pandemic's impact on tourism, the farm tourism sector remains a sustainable industry in the Philippines, with expansion plans predating the crisis. However, a comprehensive analysis of internal and external factors influencing the industry is necessary for improvement. These factors may have been influenced by a perceived elite network of public and private organizations involved in patronage politics,



potentially excluding marginalized small farmers. Consequently, it becomes crucial to develop entrepreneurial and hospitality skills among farmers to address this issue.

Farm tourism played a vital role in supporting sustainable development by generating income, conserving biodiversity, driving social change, and preserving cultural heritage. Ongoing studies and promotional efforts, including the DOT's digital campaign, created opportunities for farmers to optimize land utilization and generate employment. National policies such as RA 10816 and RA 9593 have guided, promoted and regulated the development of farm tourism in the country, aligning with sustainable tourism practices.

CALABARZON can further develop its farm tourism sector, increase visitor numbers, and create sustainable economic opportunities for farmers and rural communities while preserving its natural and cultural heritage. These objectives can be achieved through various strategies, including:

1. Enhancement of product development;
2. Strengthening of partnerships;
3. Infrastructure development;
4. Capacity building and training;
5. Sustainability and conservation efforts;
6. Marketing and promotion of tourist attractions in the region.; and
7. Development and improvement of policies supporting the farm tourism sector.

The success of previous campaigns has boosted brand awareness and increased visitor arrivals, contributing to the overall growth of the tourism industry. By implementing appropriate policies and initiatives, the Philippines can unlock its potential to become a leading farm tourism destination in the region while upholding sustainable tourism principles.

The RFTSAP focuses on collecting information relevant to the community's farm tourism practices, covering both internal and external factors that influence the farm tourism industry. These factors encompass environmental resources and conditions, community dynamics, economic and political landscapes, as well as destination analysis. Additionally, the data collection process conducted by the RFTSAP involved a SWOT analysis and FGDs to explore perceived motivations, target markets, and sources of information for visitors. Consequently, the group was also assigned the task of identifying both present conditions and future aspirations. This study suggests future research should delve into a more detailed data pool on the impacts of rural tourism and its coexistence with local communities.

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### **COMPETING INTEREST**

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.