

Article

Agritourism Development in the USA: The Strategy of the State of Michigan

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Abstract: Agritourism has been widely promoted by governments at many levels, especially in the developed regions of Europe and North America, as a tool to revitalize rural economies and as a sustainable path. Research on agritourism has mainly focused on defining and categorizing agritourism, farmers' perceptions, tourists' attitudes, tourism benefits, and marketing. However, little attention has been paid to characterizing the processes and strategies of agritourism development in a relatively large region, for instance, in a state or a province. This article uses the state of Michigan in the Midwest of the USA as a case study, systematically collecting academic publications from several literature databases on agritourism, the state's regulation and policies on agritourism, the development of agritourism associations, the participation of universities in agritourism related to academic and outreach activities, identifying key and critical developmental events, and reconstructing the historical phases of the agritourism development process. It summarizes the significant characteristics of agritourism's development in the state of Michigan, the state government's comprehensive strategy and leadership, the universities' strong intellectual support, and the consistent involvement of the industrial associations, as well as the interactions of these three parties at the different developmental stages of agritourism. The discussion is set in the wider context of agritourism's development in the USA. We conclude by presenting the implications and recommendations derived from the agritourism development experience in the state of Michigan. We specifically discuss the relevance of the Michigan experience for agritourism stakeholders in other regions worldwide, especially those that are still in the early stages of agritourism development, such as China.

Keywords: agritourism; development strategies; Michigan; tourism area life cycle

1. Introduction

The term, "agritourism", is usually defined as a range of agriculture-related tourist activities performed on farms or other agricultural environments for leisure, entertainment, or education purposes [1–3]. Agritourism, as both a concept and a practice, originated in Europe's Alpine mountain farms in the nineteenth century as the growing railway network allowed tourists to travel to them from the expanding industrial urban regions to the north. Austria, in particular, has developed its agritourism steadily since then [4]. The first part of the Austrian Farm Holiday Association was created in 1971, with a full National Austrian Farm Holiday Association in operation by 1991. By 1985, Italy had produced a National Legal Framework for Agritourism, passing a law encouraging overnight farm stays and other recreational farm activities as a way for all Italian farmers to consider diversifying their income [5]. Post ca. 1990, agritourism spread to France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan [6–9].

While agritourism appears to be flourishing in practice, there have been divergent views on the boundaries and characteristics of the concept, and the vagueness of its

definitions and classifications has resulted in confusion over this emerging industry. Moreover, related research, policies, and programs have been hindered by the inconsistency in definitions and the lack of an agreed-upon framework [2,10–12]. However, it was soon recognized as an important niche market within, and part of, the closely related concept of rural tourism [6,13]. Many case studies report that agritourism development provides complementary income to small operators [14–16], creates jobs and stimulates local development [17,18], and benefits local communities economically, socially, and environmentally [19–22]. Therefore, it is also largely advocated for not only as an economical tool, but also often as a sustainable development path, especially in rural areas, with different cultural and social contexts worldwide [5,20,23–31]. A recent systematic literature review conducted by Ammirato et al. [28] confirms that agritourism and sustainability are closely linked.

Agritourism is a complex research topic. It is a diversified and agriculture-based development pattern, combining agricultural production with special types of tourism, and can be seen as a fringe practice that provides a variety of products and services, which distinguishes it from traditional rural tourism and make it a new form of industrial tourism. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) writes that through agritourism, or “agricultural tourism or recreational services” in its wording, communities can “revitalize rural economies, educate the public about agriculture, and preserve agricultural heritage” [32]. The most common terms in the literature are “agritourism” and “farm tourism”, whereas “agriculturalism” is more popular in Europe for its broader meaning [1]. In this study, we adopted the definition by the Michigan Legislative P.A. 46 of 2005: “the practice of visiting an agribusiness, horticultural, or agricultural operation, including, but not limited to, a farm, orchard, or winery or a companion animal or livestock show, for the purpose of recreation, education, or active involvement in the operation, other than as a contractor or employee of the operation” [33]. This concise definition has also been well-accepted by other literature on Michigan agritourism [14,18,34–41].

Research on agritourism mostly focuses on: agriculture; the rural economy; tourism and planning, including the possibility of supplementing income from sources other than traditional agricultural production [37,42–44]; solutions for alleviating the downward trend of the rural economy [41,45–47]; the landscape of agritourism and the implications of agritourism on urban-rural relations [4,35,48–50]; and technology adoption and innovations [9,51–55]. It pays much attention to one or more agritourism operators, or the attitudes, intentions, feelings, and behaviors of agritourists [12,56–59].

Although agritourism has been developing for decades, there are few studies on the trajectories, models, and strategies of agritourism development in a region. However, research in these aspects is very important for local governments so that they can formulate and implement paths, strategies, policies, and regulations for agritourism, developed as expected economically, socially, and environmentally, for operators and for local and regional communities. Agritourism, as a form of business, pursues economical profits and its agricultural character may be weakened through the modernization of farms, the urbanization of services, and the commercialization of the activities offered, as observed in Italy [20,21,53]. It also plays an instrumental role in guiding agritourism operators in carrying out agritourism activities in a sustainable way. Moreover, it is often overlooked that, in the 1980s and 1990s, the USA and Canada were leaders in the fields of developing both agritourism and rural tourism methodically, using innovative techniques, state by state, community by community, with considerable input from academics in those states and communities.

Two key features were of great importance in that early period. First, universities played a leading role in developing and implementing agritourism policies. Over 100 major US Universities were funded from 1862 onwards by large grants of agricultural land from the federal government. Many of those “land grant” universities were required to take a special interest in practical issues, including agriculture. This led to the creation of Extension Studies Departments, working in the field, outside their universities, to

educate, train, assist, and research agricultural interests and rural communities. Most Extension Studies work still exists. Many departments became interested in working in agritourism and rural tourism in the 1980s. Typically, they offered training and assistance to communities developing tourism, carried out research, and published training guides and other print publications for communities and businesses [6,60] (at this point the Internet was relatively unknown as a way of publishing).

Secondly, the work of the land grant universities helped pave the way for research into aspects of the new field of sustainable tourism in the 1980s. Most of the Extension Studies work concentrated on social and cultural, rather than environmental, conservation, but it helped launch the work of a number of important future sustainable tourism researchers, including William Gartner, Patrick Long, and Nancy Gard McGehee (see [61–63]).

Using the state of Michigan in the Midwest of the USA as a case study, this article reconstructs the historical phases of agritourism development in the state. In the second part of the article, it works through a collection of the academic and technical papers, information on the state's official website, and other online materials on the state's agritourism development. The third part of this paper systematically summarizes some of the distinctive characteristics of Michigan's agritourism development. Finally, some recommendations are offered, which could be combined with China's current agritourism development.

2. Research Method and Data Collection

Usually, it takes decades or longer for a region's agritourism to develop from the initial stage of single forms (often farm stays and U-pick crops) to the mature stage of diverse forms of tourism activity. Therefore, it is difficult, but necessary, to collect information and data that span a long period of time. Thanks to the rapid development of the Internet, we were able to retrieve information from several important literature libraries (Microsoft Academic, Scopus, and Web of Science) [64,65]. In total, we studied eight academic papers on Michigan's agritourism development, including two postgraduate papers. We also browsed the websites and libraries of universities, governments, and associations, and downloaded data about agritourism in the state of Michigan and across the United States (2007–2017) from the agricultural survey database of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

3. Michigan's Agritourism Development Trajectory

3.1. Agritourism in Michigan and Its Position in the United States

Michigan is a large agricultural state in the United States, and 80% of its communities are rural. As Michigan's second largest industry, agriculture contributes approximately USD 104 billion annually to the state's economy, employs about one million local residents, and is second only to California across America [66]. However, Michigan farms are small, with an average size of 209 acres, which is much less than the national average of 443 acres. Especially after China's accession to the WTO in 2001, under the pressure of globalization, small-sized farms, such as family farms, which are unfavorable for capital- and technology-intensive agricultural production, have been struggling for survival, and many are on the verge of bankruptcy or are facing the risk of being acquired by neighbors. In this context, agritourism emerged as an effective way for them to combat falling agricultural prices and economic slowdown. In 1995, Michigan had a tourist deficit of 3.5 million people, which caused a loss of billions of dollars [33]. The optimization of the state's tourism resources aside, promoting agritourism could be the main force of tourism increments in order to retain Michigan's tourism expense within the state, as well as attract tourists from other states to reduce the tourism trade deficit. Driven by these aspects, Michigan has become a leader in agritourism across the United States.

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted a five-year national Census of Agriculture for the first time, requiring farmers to report their income from agritourism [8]. While the number of farms remained unchanged, agritourism income increased sharply, from USD 3.3 million to USD 23 million. In the latest two census years, 2012 and 2017, the number of agritourism farms in Michigan was basically around 750, with the income from

agritourism maintained at USD 20 million. Michigan ranked among the top 10 out of all the 50 states in terms of both the number of agritourism farms, and the total income, which was evidently better than Michigan's GDP ranking (14th) in the country [33] (see Table 1).

Table 1. Agritourism of Michigan in the USA.

Year	National Income (m USD)	National Farm Count	Michigan Income (m USD)	Michigan Income Percentage ¹	Michigan Farm Count	Michigan Farm Percentage ²	Michigan Income Rank	Michigan Farm Count Rank
2002	202	28.016	3.30	1.63%	615	2.20%	12	14
2007	556.83	23.35	22.90	4.04%	645	2.76%	6	8
2012	704.04	33.161	19.00	2.70%	802	2.42%	8	12
2017	949.32	28.575	21.00	2.21%	754	2.64%	13	10

¹ Michigan as a percentage of the nation's income; ² Michigan as a percentage of the nation's farms.

3.2. Development Stages and Milestones of Michigan Agritourism

The famous theory of the tourism area life cycle (TALC) has been widely verified, accepted, and applied by tourism academia and in the industry [67,68] since R.W. Butler first proposed it in 1980 [69]. It discusses the development stages of a tourist destination, the influencing factors of each stage, and how to adjust the life cycle of a tourist destination [70–72]. The TALC model identifies six stages involved in the life cycle of a tourism destination: Exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation. The length of each stage, the number of tourists, and other parameters are closely related to the characteristics of the tourist destination. Agritourism itself is a product of internal and external factors, such as world economic crises, urbanization, and agricultural competition, as well as many more factors at various scales (e.g., food security, climate change, global pandemic, political disturbances [12,30,31,54]), that can affect the development of agritourism in a given context, or even worldwide and, thus, change the trajectory of its development life cycle. All of these factors can affect strategies that may require appropriate and prompt adjustments for further sustainable development. By combining the TALC model, related literature, and data on Michigan agritourism, we believe that the state's agritourism has entered the fourth stage, that of consolidation. The following illustrates the developments and milestones of the four stages that Michigan agritourism has gone through (see Table 2).

Table 2. Development stages of agritourism in Michigan, USA.

Development Stage	Time Phase	Milestone Events
Exploration	Before 1979	1979: publishing of a directory of statewide agricultural markets and U-pick products by the state government.
Involvement	1979–2001	1997: consumer research by U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2001: heavy blow to the state's auto industry and agriculture brought by China's entry to the WTO. 2002: agritourism research by Michigan State University. 2005: agritourism research by U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2005: agritourism research by Western Michigan University. 2005: defined "Agricultural Tourism" and established the nine-member Michigan Agricultural Tourism Advisory Commission.
Development	2001–2014	2007: release of the Report of Recommendations by the Michigan Agricultural Tourism Advisory Commission. 2007: establishment of the Michigan Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association, urged by Dr. O'Connor of Michigan State University. 2007: inclusion of income from agritourism in the national Census of Agriculture for the first time. 2009: issuance of the Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices.

Table 2. Cont.

Development Stage	Time Phase	Milestone Events
Consolidation	2014–present	2019: October as Michigan Agritourism Month, proclaimed by the Governor of Michigan. Present: commitment to making innovations in marketing strategies to promote agritourism by the state government.
Stagnation, Decline, or rejuvenation		

3.2.1. Exploration (before 1979)

As mentioned before, Michigan is a large agricultural state with rich agritourism endowment, and it pioneers agritourism development. However, its internal demand for tourism is small, since many of its urban families choose to visit their relatives in the countryside during holidays [34]. In 1979, the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) began to collect information about agritourism farms in the state and published a directory of Michigan's agricultural markets and U-pick products. From this, we believe that Michigan agritourism, before 1979, was at a stage when farms and tourists explored agritourism activities [34]. The publishing of the directory indicates that agritourism development evolved from the spontaneous embryonic stage to the next period.

3.2.2. Involvement (1979–2001)

The auto industry, Michigan's first pillar industry, had been facing fierce competition from rising stars, such as Japan and South Korea, and had declined since the 1970s and 1980s. China's entry into the WTO in 2001 brought unexpected effects to its agriculture, the second pillar industry [34]. These two events struck Michigan's economy hard. Against this backdrop, governments at all levels, farmers, and especially the struggling small- and medium-sized farms were urgently seeking more sources of income. After 2001, government departments and university extension services began to investigate agritourism development in the state: Michigan State University in 2002, the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2005, and Western Michigan University in 2005 [33]. Before 2001, Michigan's agritourism development was slow, with a growth rate of 0–0.5%, the government and the assembly did not enact any related laws and regulations, and public universities rarely participated in research on agritourism. Consequently, most agritourism business entities operated alone, and related tourist facilities were simple and insufficient. Michigan was in the involvement stage of agritourism development from 1979 to 2001.

3.2.3. Development (2001–2014)

The year 2001 was a tipping point for Michigan's economy, and agriculture in particular, in which Michigan agritourism entered the fast track of development. In 2005, with the conduct of the statewide agritourism surveys noted above, the governor and the Michigan Legislature formally put the agritourism industry on the state's agenda. The Michigan Legislature (PA 46 of 2005) [33] defined "Agricultural Tourism" and authorized the establishment of the nine-member Michigan Agricultural Tourism Advisory Commission, under which three subcommittee groups were formed. Members conducted a comprehensive analysis of surveys in four states and convened six meetings in different parts of the state. They learned from the best practices of other states and solicited suggestions from Michigan's main agritourism participants. With all the work completed, they submitted the Report of Recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature in January 2007, making recommendations on three main aspects: promotion and awareness, signage, and zoning, in which several innovative solutions were presented, for instance, using websites for promotion, and GPS for signage [33]. It is worth noting that the whole

process involved various agritourism participants, including operators and managers at all levels of government, legislators, industry associations, university researchers, etc.

Another milestone of this stage was that Dr. O'Connor of Michigan State University (MSU) pointed out the opportunity and the significance of establishing an agritourism association in his doctoral dissertation after interactions with agritourism operators. In 2007, Dr. O'Connor seized the opportunity to establish the Michigan Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association [18,33,39]. The association has made a great contribution to Michigan's agritourism development in several aspects. Every year it issues paper and electronic manuals of agritourism destinations across the state, and the latest 2020 version even has 136 colored pages [73]. It also contributed to the issuance of the Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices (GAAMPs) led by the MDARD, according to which a new department was added to manage farm markets. By formulating guiding rules and standards, the department has been conducive to the healthy and sustainable development of local farm markets. Those rules and standards are open for public advice every year, then reviewed and issued by a special committee organized by the MDARD, and recommended to all levels of regulators and operators to practice [41,74].

It was in 2007 that the U.S. Department of Agriculture included the survey on agritourism income in its five-year national Census of Agriculture. In 2012, the name of the Michigan Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association was renamed the Michigan Agri-Tourism Association and, in 2014, it changed its public name to the more widely accepted Michigan Agritourism [73].

Michigan agritourism took off at this stage. Veeck et al. estimate that, in 2012, the gross revenue from agritourism in Michigan was USD 434 million, of which farm markets, orchards, and vineyards/wineries combined accounted for 64% [18], and the taxes paid by all agritourism operations was USD 13.7 million. Across the year, the agritourism industry created 4000 full-time jobs and provided work for 28,000 part-time employees. Michigan agritourism had entered into the development stage during this time period, evidenced by the increase in agritourism types [34] and tourists, the backup and improvement of legislation, and the establishment of industry associations.

3.2.4. Consolidation (2014–Present)

The USDA's Census of Agriculture offers an overview of Michigan's agritourism development since 2014. The number of agritourism operators decreased from 802 to 754 [32], but the gross revenue increased from USD 19 million to USD 21 million between the 2012 Census and the 2017 Census. It can be inferred from the decline that, because of intensified competition and a slowing economy, agritourism operations were at risk for shutdowns and bankruptcy and were inclined to merge with each other.

In order to consolidate the achievements of the previous stage, a milestone event happened in 2019: The Governor of Michigan proclaimed October as Michigan Agritourism Month to drive agritourism development in the state [75]. MDARD Director Gary McDowell said: "Agritourism opportunities are available in every county in our state, and Michigan Agritourism Month is a special time to acknowledge and experience the vast, integrated network of family farmers, processors, wholesalers, and retailers who produce a safe and nutritious food supply, as well as so many fun and unique farm experiences". The purpose of the move was to promote agritourism through innovations in marketing strategies [75].

The Michigan Agritourism Association continues to work with other stakeholders on the passage of the Agritourism Rights Act, which will help solve legal risk issues for agritourism operators, as well as land planning issues for local governments, and will pave the way for more farms and individuals to participate in agritourism [18,76–78]. Meanwhile, ordinances by local governments also place restrictions on agritourism activities to ensure that the agricultural character is maintained [79], for example, as in Sylvan Township of Washtenaw County, Michigan [80].

4. Characteristics of Michigan's Agritourism Development

4.1. Overall Strategy Taken by Michigan Government

The overall strategy of the state government serves as the guide, and a strong driver of Michigan's agritourism development in the above four stages, which could not be accomplished by industry associations and universities alone. The strategies and practices at different stages are summarized below.

- (1) Despite the rich experience accumulated in the long exploration stage (before 1979), and the involvement stage (1979–2001), Michigan agritourism reached a bottleneck in 2005. Fortunately, the state government identified this challenge and turned it into an opportunity by taking decisive measures to support agritourism on a macro level. In 2005, the MDARD formed the Michigan Agricultural Tourism Advisory Commission, which included four representatives from agritourism enterprises, two from local governments, and three others from Travel Michigan, a chamber of commerce in a rural area, and the Michigan Department of Agriculture, breaking down industrial barriers in all aspects. The Commission systematically collected input from the personal experience and expertise of its members, on the basis of which favorable laws and regulations were formulated, and both short-term and long-term strategies were developed. The Commission, and its authoritative recommendations issued in 2007, provided useful policy guidance to lower-level governments (counties and towns), many of which revised their policies and regulations accordingly to boost local agritourism. The 2007 Census of Agriculture saw Michigan's agricultural income rise 5.9 times from that of 2002, while the number of farms stayed unchanged, revealing the strong momentum of agritourism in the state.
- (2) The MDARD has encouraged and collaborated with industry associations to obtain information about existing agritourism operations and has established a comprehensive information database by aggregating Michigan's agritourism resources. Moreover, it started its consumer research in 1997 to collect benchmark data on agritourists' travel and consumption habits. On the basis of the two data sources, a statewide strategic marketing plan for agritourism has been formulated and implemented.
- (3) The MDARD has issued an entrepreneurial guide for agricultural operations to help those agritourism enterprises to identify current opportunities in the industry [81,82]. It also conducts outreach activities regularly to enhance public awareness of the value of agritourism. From 1979 to 2006, it published an agritourism directory every year, accessible to the public both online and offline. Neither agritourism businesses nor tourists could have taken the above three measures because of their lack of financial and resource support.
- (4) The MDARD has developed a pilot Recreational Route with an agritourism theme in areas that are rich in agricultural tourism attractions. It is also promoting Michigan agricultural fairs and festivals, such as the Wine Trail and the Agricultural Carnival. It has also launched a series of promotional activities, such as Michigan Week, Michigan Wine Month, the Farm Market, etc. In October 2019, Michigan's governor, Gretchen Whitmer, proclaimed October as Michigan Agritourism Month. Since the consolidation phase after 2014, the state government has shifted its focus to the promotion of agritourism among consumers.
- (5) The MDARD has established a strong partnership with MSU and other organizations to promote the adoption of the Agricultural Tourism Zoning Guidebook and the Model Zoning Ordinance Provisions, developed by the Michigan Agricultural Tourism Advisory Commission, among all the agritourism operators and officials of the towns and townships. In addition, the state government has worked closely with research institutions to develop some pilot agritourism practices. It is noteworthy that it factors in local conditions, rather than taking the one-size-fits-all approach of pressing ahead with measures that it considers most effective.
- (6) Over half of the states in the United States have enacted statutes that address agritourism [83]. These statutes vary from liability protections for agritourism oper-

ators, to tax credits, to zoning requirements. Page 93 of the Michigan Right to Farm Act, enacted in 1981, presents the importance of the agritourism legislation for healthy environmental management and the protection of farmers' legal rights. Michigan's recreational-use statutes outperform those of other states in protecting agritourism operators.

4.2. *Involvement of Academic Institutions*

Michigan State University (MSU) is a public university [84] that evolved from the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan, established in 1855. MSU Extension mainly focuses on the promotion of agriculture, with an office in each county of the state, where professional personnel provide consulting services for farmers on agriculture and agritourism.

The Michigan government recognizes MSU's expertise in the planning, zoning, and legislating of agritourism, and encourages it to participate in local affairs. A 2002 study by MSU quantifies the economic and market relations between the tourism industry and the Michigan wine industry [38]. Patrick O'Connor, from MSU, conducted a survey of over 300 agritourism enterprises in his 2005 doctoral dissertation, providing valuable basic information [75] that has greatly contributed to the establishment of the Michigan Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association. Dr. O'Connor has been the chairman of this association for many years, and has made outstanding contributions to its growth and the promotion of agritourism throughout the state [73].

MSU Extension has been devoted to bringing important tourism knowledge and the latest news and information to more people. It also works with the Product Center at MSU to provide consulting services for agritourism enterprises on product development and marketing strategies to help them commercialize high-value agricultural products in Michigan. It specializes in cultivating agricultural professionals, organizing surveys, and conducting scientific research on agritourism. It also plays an important role in urging the government and the legislature to promptly take legislative measures by communicating to them the collected information on agritourism, the problems in agritourism practices, and the legal concerns of agritourism operators or local units of the government.

MSU Extension brought the inaugural "Breakfast on the Farm" event (BOTF) [85] to a family farm near the mid-Michigan town of St. Johns in June 2009. Since then, this annual event has engaged more than 85,000 children and adults throughout the state [85], allowing the participants to learn about the production and processing of local food, farm facilities, and animal care. First Impressions Tourism [86,87] is a popular and innovative program of comprehensive community assessments rolled out by MSU Extension since 2015. The Extension introduces a team of unannounced visitors to a host community to assess its tourism after a first-time visit, then shares the results with local tourism stakeholders, including citizens, hotel owners, park managers, restaurant owners, agritourism operators, planners, etc. Four to six months later, the Extension will again collect suggestions on future improvement, discuss their feasibility, and make plans to enhance local tourism. The First Impressions program has become increasingly popular across the state since 2015, and had engaged and improved 17 communities by 2019.

It is worth noting that Western Michigan University, another public university in the state, is also actively engaging in local agritourism research and planning. With the assistance of WMU's researchers, the MDARD pioneered local agritourism research by organizing some agritourism operators to conduct a systematic survey of Michigan agritourism, generating many academic papers [14,18,34,37,40,41]. MSU produced two related dissertations by itself [35,39]. Overall, these research efforts focus on the economic, social, and cultural aspects of agritourism and little on the environmental impact, one of the critical components of sustainable development.

4.3. *Involvement of Michigan Agritourism Association*

In 2007, following Dr. O'Connor's research, a group of farm operators decided to form an organization to specifically represent the unique needs of farms that welcome

visitors. As a result, the Michigan Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association was established with sponsorship from the MDARD, the Michigan Farm Bureau, Farm Bureau Insurance of Michigan, and government grants. The association is a nonprofit organization that supports the agritourism industry through promotion, education, advocacy, problem resolution, and networking.

In 2007, the association took over the production of the statewide directory of agritourism enterprises, available for free viewing and downloading on the official website (visit <https://www.michiganfarmfun.com/getadirectory.asp>, [accessed on 10 July 2021] for the newest version of 2021) [73]. Its free paper copies are also available in kiosks or tourist centers near highways across the state, with more than 60,000 copies disseminated per year. The public can search where they want to visit on the association's website as well.

For more than ten years since its establishment, the association has been dedicated to serving the state's agritourism enterprises and consumers. It has also given a strong voice to the state government for supporting agritourism. At the same time, it has been committed to raising public awareness and deepening people's understanding of rural life and traditional lifestyles.

5. Summaries and Recommendations

In summary, this study fills a research gap on investigating the trajectories and strategies of agritourism development in a relatively large region, such as a state or a province. It concludes that Michigan agritourism has currently entered the consolidation stage of its life cycle. In the exploration stage and the involvement stage, the state government took the lead in understanding the current situation of the industry and the needs of consumers. In the development stage, the state government set up an agritourism commission, and issued related consulting reports, development strategies, and regulations for management to all local units. The universities' strong intellectual support also contributed to the growth of agritourism during this period. Now in the consolidation stage, the government's role has shifted from a leader to a helper that focuses on innovative marketing strategies, serving as a platform or a guide for agritourism. The model of the tourism area life cycle is variable and complex since the tourist destinations are different in their local conditions and, thus, so is the research on development strategies at different stages.

Agritourism is one of the sustainable development paths that both developed and developing countries must follow. With the largest agricultural population in the world, the Chinese government has always regarded rural development as a priority and has been working hard to find effective ways to facilitate it [88]. In the 1980s, the embryonic form of agritourism emerged and indicated a starting point for the combined development of the primary industry and the tertiary industry. In 2005, the eleventh Five-Year Plan proposed that leisure agriculture should be promoted as a new agricultural development model throughout the country, especially in counties, towns, and villages with convenient transportation to cities, for the advancement of a new socialist countryside [88]. Subsequently, the State Council, the Ministry of Agriculture, the National Tourism Administration, and the National Development and Reform Commission all issued opinions, notices, reports, and plans, etc., to promote the development of leisure agriculture. Over the past 15 years, China's agritourism development has been extremely imbalanced. The Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta have entered the fast track, while the northeast and northwest regions are still in the exploration stage. There are also huge gaps between different parts of cities [89,90]. For instance, in Nanjing, Jiangning District is in the development stage, while Liuhe District has just reached the involvement stage [91]. These phenomena demonstrate that agritourism development varies, from tourist destinations to counties, cities, regions, and even countries [89]. It's a process as complicated as the evolution of organisms. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach is not feasible, and development paths and strategies should be customized for different places and stages.

It can be seen from the analysis of Michigan's agritourism trajectory that research is at the core of the government's role in the exploration stage and the involvement

stage, in order to recognize the importance and potential of the agritourism industry. Governments should conduct research on agritourism within their jurisdiction to identify and support key enterprises in the industry. In 2020, the first author spent six months assisting Liuhe District to complete the investigation report on agritourism in the district, and made recommendations on its development strategies, drawing the conclusion that Liuhe District is now in the involvement stage [91]. In light of this research, the Liuhe Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has undertaken to increase financial support as appropriate, build a rating system for agritourism resources, and improve its rural road system.

In the development stage, the government should play a guiding role in the industry, with its focus shifted from research to the establishment of organizations, such as an agritourism industry association, the formulation of overall policies, the improvement of industrial regulations, and the intellectual support of universities and research institutes. Under the leadership of the government, talents, institutions, and other stakeholders should work together to contribute to the steady growth of revenue from agritourism by synergizing related policies, regulations, and various financial support. China's developed agritourism regions are basically in the development stage, with strong momentum. However, despite the active engagement of departments, universities, and industry associations, industry regulations and financial support are insufficient. Moreover, universities and the government need to strengthen their cooperation accordingly.

Agritourism in China, as well as in other countries and regions worldwide, is facing the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic [11,92–95], which may also provide a great opportunity for different agritourism stakeholders to learn, adapt, and adjust [93,94,96]. Agritourism operators may find more tourists and profits, as many tourists choose rural stays over large hotels to reduce the risk of virus infection [11,97,98]. Policymakers may consider the impact of the pandemic on the life cycle of agritourism development on a regional scale, which may likely cause the consolidation stage to occur faster and end quicker, or the stagnation stage to emerge earlier. Agritourism associations and researchers may find many unique topics to address during the pandemic and, thus, help other stakeholders [93].

Agritourism can be seen as a paradigm for “new agriculture” and “new tourism” [99]. It is constantly changing and the owners of agritourism farms, as well as other stakeholders, should look for new solutions, such as innovative products and marketing strategies, and resiliently take advantage of new opportunities for long-term sustainable development. China is a latecomer to agritourism but is developing rapidly. Therefore, it is necessary to factor in China's unique national conditions [68,100] when applying the model of the tourism area life cycle to China's agritourism, and to learn from the expertise and best practices of other countries. Overall, we encourage governments of developing countries worldwide, such as China, to try their best to get universities and industrial associations involved at the different stages of agritourism development [9], especially in order to tackle this long-lasting global pandemic.

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