

THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABILITY CRITERIA IN CONTROLLING THE QUALITY OF AGRITOURISM SERVICES IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

The global character of sustainable development has made agritourism a popular phenomenon in both developed and developing countries, as it is advantageous from the standpoint of local economic and social development. Sustainability criteria play a vital role in controlling the quality of agritourist services of leader countries in agritourism. However, the development of agritourism in Uzbekistan has very different characteristics and development levels compared to other countries, especially countries in Western Europe. This article explores the integration of sustainability principles within the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan. As Uzbekistan's agritourism industry continues to grow, the importance of sustainability criteria in ensuring the quality of agritourist services becomes increasingly evident. A survey was conducted to investigate the importance of sustainability in the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan. The research findings indicate that there is a growing interest in agritourism in Uzbekistan. However, there is a need to improve the quality and sustainability of agritourism services in order to meet the expectations of tourists. This, in turn, enhances the overall visitor experience and contributes to the long-term sustainability of the industry. This article, relying on quantitative method, reveals the assessment of quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan from the sustainability point of view. In the context of Uzbekistan, the article emphasizes the nation's strategic initiatives to promote sustainable resource management, water efficiency, conservation, and environmental preservation in its agricultural and agritourism sectors ensuring the delivery of high-quality services and products while contributing to environmental preservation.

Key words: agritourism, quality label, sustainability, rural development.

Introduction

The size of the world market for agritourism was US\$ 65.6 billion in 2023. According to IMARC Group's projections, the market would increase at a pace of 11.45% from 2024 to 2032 and reach a value of US\$ 176.6 billion. Air pollution in cities (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), GMOs in food (Azadi, Taube, & Taheri, 2017), as well as other global problems cause an increase in the number of tourists in agritourism places. People are actively choosing both inbound and outbound agritourism because of the clean environment, fresh food, leisure activities, and other health benefits associated with agritourism. The ability for visitors to select fresh fruits straight from farms at the different agritourism-related on-farm farmer's markets draws a lot of people to the industry (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2015).

Sustainability criteria in agritourism: The problem of utilizing resources sustainably and efficiently in the new century is what is driving improved changes in the ways that we create, consume, and live. This proves to be an increasingly significant obstacle, particularly for companies in the agriculture industry (Whitfield, Challinor, & Rees, 2018). The attempt to meet the growing global demand for food as a result of population growth may be the solution to this problem. This can be done by using agricultural practices and techniques that allow for increased farm productivity and the provision of environmental services without depleting resources while also controlling wastes and harmful environmental externalities. By investigating the topic, study shows that one of the key benefits of agritourism, which is a subset of rural tourism, is the enhancement of food and gourmet options, which boosts the region's economic and social well-being (Mackay, Nelson, & Perkins, 2019). Agritourism also

gives local farmers the opportunity to earn additional revenue (Bhatta, Itagaki, & Ohe, 2019).

In the table below, the matrix of sustainable agritourism is proposed by Ammirato. In this matrix, the extent to which agritourism can affect the economic, social and natural environment on micro and macro scales, based on bibliographic information from the works of various scientists, is shown (Table 1). The matrix of sustainable agritourism (Ammirato *et al.*, 2020) highlights the relationship between rural society and sustainable economy (Roberts & Tribe, 2008; Barbieri, 2013; Naido & Sharpley, 2016), environmental sustainability (Barbieri, 2013; Pratt, Suntikul, & Dorji, 2018; DeRosa, McElwee, & Smith, 2019), social sustainability in agritourism (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Roberts & Tribe, 2008; Barbieri, 2013).

The economic, environmental and social dimensions of the matrix assess the economic, environmental and social benefits of agritourism for both the local community and the agritourism business itself.

Businesses can use the matrix to identify areas where they can improve their sustainability practices. The matrix can also be used by governments and other stakeholders to develop policies and programs that support sustainable agritourism development. Overall, the matrix of sustainable agritourism is a useful tool for promoting sustainable agritourism development.

Quality issues in agritourism: Today's travelers are more knowledgeable and concerned about what they eat, where the food comes from, and how it is produced. In fact, food is one of the major reasons that they travel, and agriculture provides a real sense of place. Agritourism has emerged as a niche market that combines agriculture and tourism. Increasingly, both farm hosts and guests are becoming better informed in the way they can adjust their choices and

preferences to better meet each other’s expectations, emphasize quality standards in various aspects of the provision. Quality in agritourism plays a crucial role in deriving volume and value of the business. A number of

different scholars have focused on the importance of quality services provided at accommodation facilities and catering, the role of the staff and the activities offered, and linkages with quality local products.

Table 1

The matrix of sustainable agritourism	
Economic:	
Macro level:	Micro level:
Stimulus for other local activities, boosting local economies; Infrastructural investments.	Alternative source income for the farmer; Business diversification; Distribution channel for farm products; Developing new markets niches.
Environmental:	
Macro level:	Micro level:
Natural resources maintenance; Biodiversity and environmental protection.	Responsible use of raw materials and natural resources; Waste reduction.
Social:	
Macro level:	Micro level:
Recovery of roots, folklore, and traditions; Educate visitors toward agriculture and the rural world.	Provide alternative job opportunities to family members; Enabler of emancipation of women.

Currently, there are two types of quality labels for agritourism: one is related to the food quality, while the other is related to the sustainability of service quality (Peri, Rizzo, & Traverso, 2010).

The EU Ecolabel for Tourism Services, to assesses the environmental performance of the agritourism lodging business.

In addition to the more sophisticated industry requirements pertaining to the evaluation of food quality (which encompass the food chain and the traceability of the company), there are the PDO, PGI, TSG, and DOC brands. In order to assess the environmental strain that agricultural operations (and the food chain, among others) impose, the Life Cycle Assessment (ISO, 2006) technique is used.

The growing global demand and motivation for agrotourism forces world researchers to pay attention to the sustainable development of this field in their countries. Relying on the relevance of the above topic, this research is being carried out in Uzbekistan in order to study the importance of organizing the quality of services on the basis of sustainability criteria in agrotourism. The **research question** is as follows: How do sustainability criteria contribute to controlling the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan?

Aim: To investigate the role of sustainability criteria in enhancing the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan.

Objectives:

1. To review the scientific literature on agritourism and sustainability.
2. To conduct a survey to determine the quality of agritourism services in terms of sustainability in Uzbekistan.
3. To analyze the data from the survey to:
 - Describe the characteristics of local agritourism participants in Uzbekistan;

- Determine the importance of sustainability criteria to local travelers when choosing an agritourism services;
- Assess the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan.

4. To make recommendations for improving the quality and sustainability of agritourism services in Uzbekistan.

Background of tourism in Uzbekistan: After gaining independence, Uzbekistan began to pay attention to other sectors along with the agricultural sector, and the tourism sector also became a growing trend among them (Rakhmanov & Ibragimov, 2019). The government of Uzbekistan, along with all other economic sectors, has endeavoured to provide an environment that is very favourable and supportive of the tourism industry’s long-term growth, given the country’s high potential in this sector as a competitiveness of the destination (Ibragimov & Khamidov, 2023). The government has also been paying increasing attention to agritourism in rural areas in recent years. For instance, Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Tourism and Sports have been working closely together to create agritourism initiatives. Consequently, Uzbekistan has experienced a significant increase in the number of international tourists during the previous five years. According to the World bank data, in 2023, the number of international tourists amounted to 6.6 million visitors to Uzbekistan, see ‘Figure 1’.

Scholars in the field acknowledge the significance of agritourism in the sustainable development of rural regions and in the plan to improve the standard of living for the rural people (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2015). Increasing additional revenue through tourist-related activities is the goal of the agricultural-based tourism, Sustainable Development Strategy, which takes into account harvesting, agriculture, the environment,

engaging in farming practices, and leisure (Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

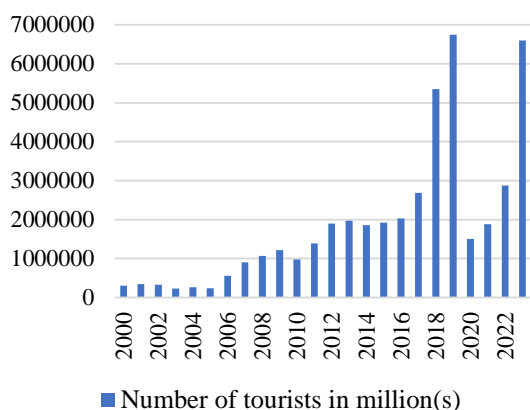


Figure 1. Number of foreign tourists in Uzbekistan, almost all of these tourists visited Uzbekistan for the purpose of leisure (Sayfullayeva, 2022).

These kinds of social activities are predicated on rural farms engaging in agricultural operations, which fosters the environment that is conducive to the long-term growth of agritourism. The global character of sustainable development has made agritourism a popular phenomenon in both developed and developing countries, as it is advantageous from the standpoint of local economic and social development. It also encourages environmentally friendly agriculture and development within rural areas by creating extra off-farm employment opportunities and encouraging diversified production. However, the development of agritourism in Uzbekistan has very different characteristics and development levels compared to other countries, especially countries in Western Europe.

Materials and Methods

The research on the role of agritourism in Uzbekistan was conducted in several stages:

Firstly, a review of scientific literature was conducted to investigate the importance of the quality of agritourism services in terms of sustainability. The literature review covered a range of topics, including:

- The growing market characteristics of agritourism,
- The benefits of agritourism for rural communities,
- The role quality ensuring sustainability in agritourism services.

Secondly, analysis of national statistical data was carried out.

Key indicators of the agriculture and tourism sectors in Uzbekistan were analyzed using data from various national statistical portals. The data was used to:

- Assess the current state of the agritourism industry in Uzbekistan,
- Determine the potential for growth in the industry.

Followingly, a survey was conducted to determine the quality of agritourism services in terms of sustainability. The survey was conducted online using

Google Forms and the sample size of 312 respondents from different regions of Uzbekistan participated. The survey consisted of five sections and was designed to collect data on the following topics:

- The demographics of respondents participating in the survey,
- Agritourism experience- the types of agritourism services that tourists participate in,
- The importance of sustainability criteria to tourists when choosing an agritourism service
- Quality of agritourism services,
- The willingness of tourists to pay for sustainable agritourism services.

The data from the survey was analyzed using a statistical technique like descriptive statistics.

The data analysis was used to:

- Describe the characteristics of agritourism tourists in Uzbekistan,
- Identify the most popular types of agritourism services,
- Determine the importance of sustainability criteria to local tourism participants,
- Assess the quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan,
- Determine the willingness of tourists to pay for sustainable agritourism services.

Results and Discussion

Findings on agritourism potential in Uzbekistan: A significant portion of Uzbekistan's GDP - about 25% - comes from the agricultural sector, which also employs over 26% of the labour force. Beginning on June 1, 2022, the state began buying and selling grain at market pricing in order to further liberalize the industry and account for a sharp increase in wheat prices worldwide. In 2022, Uzbekistan's foreign revenues from agricultural exports accounted for around 8.4% of total earnings. Through intense development initiatives, the application of cutting-edge scientific discoveries, digitization, and the adoption of new technology, the government wants to quadruple farmers' income and assure a minimum 5% annual increase in agriculture in 2022–2026.

A major goal of continuing agriculture reforms is to support the development of vertically integrated clusters, of which 633 had been registered as of 2022, and a cooperative system that offers a whole production chain 'from the field to consumer' in order to increase productivity. It can be seen that the number of agricultural products and services across regions has only been growing over the years, see 'Figure 2'. In order to support this growth, the government is creating a number of incentives. A total of \$600 million in grants and loans will be drawn toward the adoption of contemporary agricultural technology, land fertility enhancement, and digital agriculture. All areas will see the creation of Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Centres between 2022 and 2026, offering more than 100 different agricultural services under one roof, including crucial services like enhancing soil quality, preventing plant

diseases, and selecting. 90% of the water resources in Uzbekistan are used for the agricultural sector. The state intends to increase efficiency and conserve the water by 2030 strategy (Republic of Uzbekistan PD, 2020). It is now funding the implementation of water-saving

technology. According to the World Bank, Uzbekistan is now among the least productive 20 nations in the world, producing only \$0.6 per cubic meter of water, compared to the average of \$15 per cubic meter worldwide. This demands new policies enforcing sustainability.

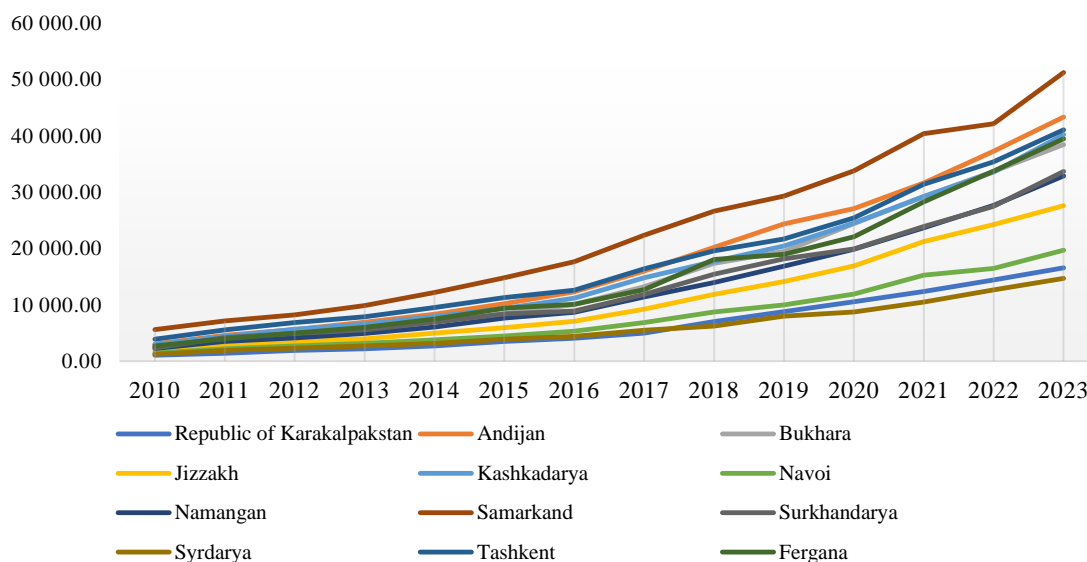


Figure 2. Volume of products and services created in agriculture (by region).

The above statistical data show that there are enough opportunities in the field of agrotourism in Uzbekistan, and the creation of services in this field is growing. However, in order to better study the situation and ensure long-term quality in this field, it was first required to study the attitude of local tourists and residents to the quality of services of agrotourism based on sustainability.

Therefore, the following main findings can be concluded from the results of the research:

Section 1: Demographic Information (Table 2): Q1, Q2: The survey respondents were primarily between the ages of 18-24 (43.3%) and 25-34 (24.7%), with a slightly higher proportion of females (53.3%) than males (46.7%).

Q3: In terms of occupation, the largest group of respondents were students (29.8%), followed by those in the ‘other’ category (35.9%), which includes a wide range of occupations. The next largest groups were teachers (11.7%), retirees (9.4%), and those in agriculture (7.1%).

Q4: The majority of respondents had a higher education (46.4%), while 38.0% had a college education and 15.6% had a high school education.

The survey respondents were a relatively young and diverse group in terms of age, gender, and occupation. A significant proportion of respondents were students, suggesting that the survey is much targeted towards a younger population and much younger segment seems are willing to participate in agritourism.

Section 2: Agritourism practice (Figure 3): The majority of respondents (64.5%) have participated in at least one agritourism activity. This indicates that agritourism is a popular activity in Uzbekistan. A significant proportion of respondents (20.8%) have not participated in any agritourism activities. A small proportion of respondents (14.7%) are interested in participating in agritourism activities in the future. This indicates that there is a growing interest in agritourism in Uzbekistan in the future. The section

Table 2

Section 1. Demographic Information			
	Category	Frequency	%
Q1 Age	18-24	135	43.3
	25-34	77	24.7
	35-44	49	15.7
	45 and over	51	16.3
	Total	312	100
Q2 Gender	Male	143	46.7
	Female	163	53.3
	Total	306	100
Q3 Occupation	Tourism	19	6.1
	Teacher	36	11.7
	Agriculture	22	7.1
	Student	92	29.8
	Retire	29	9.4
	Other	111	35.9
	Total	309	100
Q4 Educatio	Higher	143	46.4
	Collage	117	38
	High school	48	15.6
	Total	308	100

findings suggest that there is a growing demand for agritourism services in Uzbekistan.

Q5 Have you ever participated in any agritourism activity?

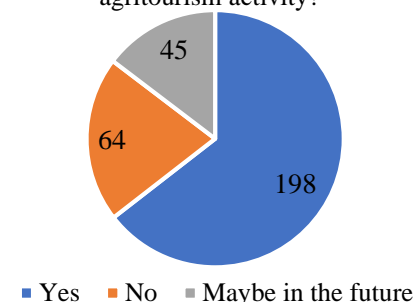


Figure 3. Respondents’ participation in agritourism.

Section 3. Sustainability criteria: Q6: With the considerable share (58.6) participants’ choice was all three sustainability pillars while traveling. Q7: The significant proportion of respondents (48.2%) believe that the agritourism services they have experienced meet the sustainability criteria only partially.

Table 4

Section 3. Sustainability Criteria			
Q6 How important are the following sustainability criteria to you when choosing an agritourism service?	Category	Frequency	%
	Environmental conservation	54	17.8
Social responsibility	34	11.2	
Economic sustainability	38	12.5	
All	178	58.6	
Total	304	100	
Q7 How well do you think the agritourism services you have experienced meet these sustainability criteria?	No such criterion	30	10.9
	Partially	133	48.2
	Completely meets	113	40.9
	Total	276	100

This suggests that there is room for improvement in the sustainability of agritourism services in Uzbekistan. A noticeable proportion of respondents (40.9%) believe that the agritourism services they have experienced completely meet the sustainability criteria. This indicates that there are some agritourism businesses in

Uzbekistan that are implementing sustainable practices and meeting the expectations of tourists. A small proportion of respondents (10.9%) do not believe that the agritourism services they have experienced meet any of the sustainability criteria. This suggests that there are some agritourism businesses in Uzbekistan that are not implementing sustainable practices and are not meeting the expectations of tourists. This section findings suggest that local tourists are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of agritourism services.

Section 4. Quality of Agritourism Services (Table 5): Q8: The most satisfying aspect of agritourism services for respondents was food and beverages (34.4%). This encourages that agritourism businesses should focus on providing high-quality food and beverage experiences. Other aspects of agritourism services that satisfied respondents include staff friendliness and knowledge (24.3%), activities (18.8%), and accommodation (10.1%). This suggests that agritourism businesses should also focus on providing excellent customer service, offering a variety of activities, and providing comfortable accommodation. Q9: The most recognized quality label among respondents was ISO (39.9%). This suggests that agritourism businesses should consider obtaining ISO certification in order to demonstrate their commitment to quality. Other quality labels that are recognized by respondents include UzStandart (24.1%) with a bit share of Ecolabel (18.2%) and none of them recognizable (17.8%). This means that agritourism industry needs labelling the quality policy and there is a lot to do in this field.

Q10: In the next question, the majority of respondents (61.6%) agreed that the agritourism service they participated in did not harm the environment. This suggests that agritourism businesses are generally implementing sustainable practices. However, only a small proportion of respondents (0.3%) agreed that the agritourism service they experienced was economically sustainable. This suggests that there is room for improvement in the economic sustainability of agritourism services in Uzbekistan. Similarly, only a small proportion of respondents (2.6%) agreed that the agritourism service they participated in supported and benefited the local population. This suggests that there is room for improvement in the social sustainability of agritourism services in Uzbekistan.

Q11: The majority of respondents (81.8%) want their children to participate in high-quality organized agritourism trips in the future. This suggests that most parents want their children experiencing agritourism.

Q12: The majority of respondents (56.1%) were satisfied with the overall quality of their agritourism experience. This suggests that there are a number of agritourism businesses in Uzbekistan that are providing high-quality services.

Table 5

Section 4. Quality of Agritourism Services			
Q8 Which of the following aspects of agrotourism services satisfied you?	Category	Frequency	%
	Accommodation	28	10.1
	Food and beverages	95	34.4

Continuation of the Table 5

	Staff friendliness and knowledge	67	24.3
	Activities	52	18.8
	None of them	34	12.3
	Total	276	100
Q9 Which of the following quality labels do you recognize?	ISO	121	39.9
	Ecolabel	55	18.2
	UzStandart	73	24.1
	I don't know any of them	54	17.8
	Total	276	100
Q10 How much do you agree with the following statements?	The agrotourism service I participated in did not harm the environment	186	61.6
	The agritourism service I experienced was economically sustainable	1	0.3
	The agritourism service I participated in supported and benefited the local population	8	2.6
	I have no idea	107	35.4
	Total	302	100
Q11 Do you want your children to participate in high-quality organized agrotourism trips in the future?	Yes	248	81.8
	No	55	18.2
	Total	303	100
Q12 How satisfied were you with the overall quality of the agritourism experience?	Good	101	33.3
	Bad	15	5
	Average	63	20.8
	Excellent	69	22.8
	No such experience	55	18.2
	Total	303	100

Section 5. Willingness to pay (Table 6): Q13: The noticeable proportion of respondents (38.6%) are willing to pay extra for agritourism services that meet high sustainability criteria suggesting that tourists are increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impact of their travel. However, a significant proportion of respondents (44.8%) are on the opinion that this might be on their future choices. This suggests that there is a need to raise awareness of the importance of sustainability in agritourism.

Q14: 69.3% of respondents think that agritourism services bearing quality labels are crucial. This implies that travellers are looking for agritourism services that are verified as being high-quality and sustainable. Nonetheless, a sizeable segment of participants (17.6%) thinks that agritourism offerings bearing quality designations are merely somewhat relevant. This implies that more people need to be made aware of how crucial quality labels are to the agritourism industry.

Table 6

Section 5. Willingness to Pay			
	Category	Frequency	%
Q13 Are you willing to pay extra for agritourism services that meet high sustainability criteria?	Yes	118	38.6
	No	51	16.7
	May be in the future	137	44.8
	Total	306	100
	Q14 Are agrotourism services with quality labels important to you?	Of course	212
Not important		40	13.1
Partially		54	17.6
Total		306	100

Conclusions

The following can be concluded from the research results:

1. Based on the theoretical basis of the research at the initial stage, it was determined that there are enough opportunities for agrotourism in Uzbekistan. However, it was theoretically justified that quality management in terms of sustainability is a priority in the industry.
2. According to the first section of the survey, the survey respondents was a relatively young and diverse group in terms of age, gender, and occupation. It is evident that agritourism motive is higher for younger generation rather than other age profiles. Seemingly, the higher education, the greater the knowledge about agritourism.
3. Based on the second section of the results, agritourism practice is much common among local travelers. The majority of respondents have participated in at least one agritourism activity, indicating that agritourism is a popular activity in Uzbekistan. A significant proportion of respondents have not participated in any agritourism activities, and a small proportion of respondents are interested in participating in agritourism activities in the future, indicating

that there is a growing interest in agritourism in Uzbekistan.

4. Third section summarises sustainability criteria, travelers consider all three sustainability criteria (environmental conservation, social responsibility, and economic sustainability) to be important when choosing an agritourism service. This suggests that local travelers are increasingly concerned about the environmental and social impact of their travel. Agritourism businesses that are able to implement sustainable practices and meet the expectations of tourists will be more likely to attract and retain customers.
5. The quality of agritourism services in Uzbekistan is generally good. Respondents mostly made positive choices about food and drinks, which indicates the need to improve the rest of the services as well.
6. A significant proportion of respondents are willing to pay extra for agritourism services that meet high sustainability criteria. This suggests that local tourists are beginning being concerned about the environmental and social impact of their travel. Agritourism businesses can capitalize on this trend by implementing sustainable practices and obtaining quality labels.

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