

DOWN-HOME PERSPECTIVE

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One day a father and his rich family took a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his young son how poor people can be. They spent a day and a night on the farm of a very poor family. When they got back from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was your trip?"

"Very good, Dad!"

"Did you see how poor people can be?" asked the father.

"I sure did, Dad."

"And what did you learn?"

"I saw that we have a dog at home; they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of the garden; they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lamps in the garden; they have stars. Our patio reaches to the front yard; they have the whole horizon."

When the little boy was finished, the father was speechless.

Then his son added, "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are!"

Isn't it true that it all depends on the way we look at things. It's all in our perspective.

Perspective. It can turn a small farm into a sought after tourist attraction. If you look beyond the typical tourist attractions, beyond the skyscrapers and super highways, you will find an unusual destination that creates a unique experience: life on the farm. Especially since 9/11, travelers are wanting a taste of nostalgia, a place that makes them feel good and reminds them of how their grandparents lived, growing crops, raising animals and living the simple life. Do you have fond memories, as a child, visiting your grandparent's farm? Both my parents sure do.

Agritainment or agritourism, call it what you want, but it is one of the fastest growing trends in travel, where entertainment and tourism intersect with agriculture. Americans are taking shorter vacations and traveling by automobile more than any other means. Most modern vacations are three to five days in duration and aim at strengthening family relationships.

Agritourism describes the act of visiting a working farm or ranch, agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation to enjoy, be educated, entertained, buy products or to be involved in activities. Agritourism may just be part of the answer to the economic plight of farmers.

Some examples of agritourism are farm tours for families and school children, day camps, hands-on chores, self-harvesting of produce, hay and sleigh rides, wineries, corn mazes, guided hunts and overnight stays in a farm bed and breakfast.

Agri-entertainment and -tourism, new, highly consumer-focused types of agriculture, may offer additional options for diversification and stability to farm

incomes. Some people become involved in agritourism as a way of supplementing their income. Others desire the opportunity to educate the public and introduce people to farming.

Small, diversified farms are ideally suited to agri-entertainment. Unlike the mega-hog facility or the corn/soybean operation that produce bulk commodities, the small farm can recreate an earlier, simpler, human-scale vision of farming. The chief qualification for a rural landowner who expects to make a living from the land through agritourism is the desire and ability to cater to tourists and meet their expectation of a farm visit.

There are three agritourism basics: Have something for visitors to see, something for them to do, and something for them to buy. Professor Duncan Hilchey of the Cornell Sustainable Agriculture program advises American farmers: "Growers have to adopt a new outlook and they have to switch their thinking away from production toward giving today's consumers what they want. That might include farm tours, value-added products, or even adding a petting zoo. People come out to the farm these days not so much to buy large quantities of produce, but for the immersion experience for themselves and their children."

The number-one requirement for a successful agritainment venture is an abundance of energy and enthusiasm. A willingness to think unconventionally may be equally important. With enough thought, ingenuity, determination, and capital, almost any farm anywhere could be adapted to agritourism. A willingness to provide what the public truly wants and is willing to pay for is the way to success. Just as the

railroad barons of the 19th century needed to start thinking of themselves as being in the transportation business (instead of the railroad business) in order to compete successfully in the 20th century; so the farmers of the 21st century must begin thinking of themselves as being in the land management business, rather than the farming business, in order to reach their farm family goals and dreams.

Agritourism or agritainment is obviously not the answer to every farm operation's financial woes, but it is a viable option, worthy of consideration, to many. With a little patience and a lot of creativity, perhaps the country music group, Alabama's lyrics to "Down Home" ring true: "Things move at a slower pace. Nobody's in the rat race. And these days that's a special way of life. Down home, where they know you by name and treat you like family."

Yes, it all goes back to perspective. Rural America and farm living are a special way of life. Maybe it's time for farmers to realize that and change their perspective.

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