

Agro-tourism and Rural Planning

*Chien-Zer Liu**

Abstract

In nation' s aspect, a unique phenomenon of the modern and affluent society is the growing leisure time and increasing opportunities for taking a vacation. In recent years, with income level rising in Taiwan and the government' s concerted effort in developing the leisure industry in rural areas, the recreational role of the agricultural sector and rural villages has been given a great boost. At the same time, the general population can obviously enjoy better holiday alternatives.

The pursuit of an “affluent” and “natural” rural area is one of the key goals of Taiwan' s vision for the 21st century agriculture sector. Hence, rural planning has to integrate both preservation of villages and development of agro-tourism. This increasing dependence of city dwellers on agriculture and rural areas will create an influx of tourists and raise spending power, in turn carving out a profitable market that helps to achieve the dual purpose of an improved agriculture sector and prosperous rural economy.

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* Professor and Director, Graduate Institute of Rural Planning, National Chung-Hsing University, Taichung, Taiwan, R.O.C.

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Introduction

In nation's aspect, a unique phenomenon of the modern and affluent society is the growing leisure time and increasing opportunities for taking a vacation. By engaging in various rural activities, most people are released from their high-pressured working environment and routine lifestyle. Thus more and more urban dwellers are seeking the solace of nature. It is believed that the agricultural sector and rural villages are able to offer the respite that many urbanites desire. The main target is sparking a new role for the agrarian community by transforming rural villages into leisure and recreational paradise for the stressed out urban population. In turn, there is an increasing dependence on the rural area that will help boosting the agro-tourism industry.

On the other hand, agro-tourism will also generate new income streams for the rural people, such as fees derived from providing services such as tour transport and sightseeing as well as rental from farm stays and camping grounds. This supplements the relatively lower income earned by the rural community and the rise in tourist numbers in turn increases spending on farm produce, helping to develop a profitable market for the villages.

In recent years, with income level rising in Taiwan and the government's concerted effort in developing the leisure industry in rural areas, the recreational role of the agricultural sector and rural villages has been given a great boost. At the same time, the general population can obviously enjoy better holiday alternatives.

This paper will start by stating the significance and content of agro-tourism and rural leisure industry, before explaining how all these developments are complementary to rural development. It will then describe how the government is promoting agro-tourism through rural planning efforts.

Agro-tourism and Rural Village

A Significance and Functions of Agro-tourism a Definition

As mentioned above, in an effort to promote the transformation of agriculture and rural villages, Taiwan has been aggressively developing agro-tourism over the last few years. What exactly is agro-tourism?

According to the Agricultural Development Act: “Agro-tourism: Agricultural activities aiming to provide recreational resources for citizens, and to enhance citizens’ appreciation of agriculture and farming villages through the use of pastoral landscape, natural ecosystem, and environmental resources; and through the integration of farming, forestry, fishery, and livestock production, farming activities, rural culture, and peasant lifestyles”. (Article 3-5)

It can be concluded that agro-tourism is also a kind of lifestyle, and a critical part of rural leisure industry. In order to develop the rural leisure industry, besides the maintenance of the natural eco-systems and landscape, recreational facilities in the villages should be upgraded so as to increase their attractiveness and meet the needs of holidaymakers. This is the key to the promotion of leisure industry in the countryside, helping to increase employment opportunities and creating new income streams for the farmers.

In other words, agro-tourism is an integrated operation system comprising production, lifestyle and eco-systems. It is also an agricultural enterprise management system consisting of agriculture production and supply, agriculture processing and recreational services, spanning the primary, secondary and tertiary industries. It is a business model that fuses the environment, cultural and recreational elements with the main framework of agriculture activities, while providing a leisure alternative that is close to nature and the countryside. Therefore, the notion of agro-tourism covers not only tourism on the farm (or leisure agriculture) , but also any tourism activity in rural areas, which is known as a way of maintaining rural prosperity and environmental quality in the countryside.

Hence, agro-tourism is the utilization and integration of the unique quality and rich resources of the rural environment (including natural resources and landscape of rural villages, such as lakes and mountains); the diversity of agriculture production (for instance, farm produce, harvesting fruits, gardening, venues for forestry, livestock rearing and fishery operations); the local rural culture (such as cultural relics, temples and indigenous cultural practices and customs); the elegant rural landscape (village architecture, gathering sites, plazas and squares, streets, rivers, scenes of farmers working in the field and agricultural landscapes) and so on. It offers city dwellers or travelers a place to relax and enjoy the greenery of the countryside, and the chance to enjoy the simple joys of rural living, carving a niche in the leisure and hospitality industry.

Agro-tourism is not merely organizing sightseeing trips to farms or orchards, or even just developing agriculture tourist sites or jungle theme park and leisure farms. It is an approach to integrating the development blueprint of rural planning, in a bid to create a graceful and comfortable living environment while ensuring the preservation of nature and landscapes, and protecting the originality and uniqueness of the area. This would transform the countryside into a sought-after holiday destination, in turn fuelling the economic growth of the rural area. Agro-tourism aims also to improve the agrarian structure, fully utilize and preserve nature and cultural resources, provide the population a chance to experience rural living, increase employment opportunities and raise the income of farmers. All these will help to promote the overall growth of the rural areas.

The variety of farms, the different cultivation methods, the livestock rearing and crop production that shifts with the seasons, as well as specialty farmers, all contribute to the diversity of the agriculture activities, weaving a rich rural landscape that is constantly changing.

In a modern society, the agriculture industry and the rural village contribute significantly to the overall economy by preserving the vibrancy and liveliness of the rural landscapes. Hence agro-tourism and rural leisure industry should take this into consideration and proactively support the functions of these areas, helping to ensure cultural integrity, nature conservation and landscape protection. Its development should proceed on the foundation and framework of the overall growth of rural areas.

Agro-tourism is a new form of rural industry that has emerged in Taiwan in recent years. This trend is mainly a culmination of factors such as drastic changes in the agrarian structure, the transformation of urbanized society, an increasingly affluent population, and shifts in consumer patterns, increases in leisure time and improvement in traffic. At the same time, it is also an attempt at breaking the bottleneck experienced by the agriculture industry, boosting its transformation into a novel and more vibrant industry offering greater job opportunities.

a Functions

Agro-tourism is a combination of the agriculture and service industries, bearing several functions, including economic, social, educational, environmental, recreational, therapeutic, cultural heritage and so on. Details are as follows:

- (a) Economic function: to increase employment opportunities in the rural areas, improve rural income and create a flourishing rural economy.
- (b) Social function: to promote interactions among urban dwellers, rural villagers and the rural areas, further expand social network of farmers, and narrow the urban-rural gap as well as elevate the quality of life in rural areas.
- (c) Educational function: to provide opportunities for urban dwellers to understand agriculture,

educate them on the process of crop cultivation and livestock rearing, experience rural living and appreciate its culture and eco-systems.

- (d) Environmental function: to improve and upgrade the quality of rural environment, as well as to protect its natural landscape and eco-systems.
- (e) Recreational function: to provide public places for leisure activities, and operate rural leisure tours.
- (f) Therapeutic function: to provide public areas for leisure activities allowing close encounters with the natural landscape and eco-systems in the rural areas, helping to relieve daily stress from work, achieving peace of mind and body.
- (g) Cultural heritage: to ensure the preservation and continuity of the unique lifestyle, culture and folk arts of rural villages. At the same time, agro-tourism helps create a unique rural culture and cultural assets.

B The Important Functions of Rural Areas

With the social and economic development and the change of agrarian structure, the role and structure of rural village have changed. The rural village does not only provide a place for agricultural production and for farmers to live but also furnish other industries and other non-farmers with enough space.

Villages not only produce foods and raw materials, but also “provide” landscape and beautiful natural environment and conserve natural resources and landscape. In addition, with the increase of national income and vacation time, the diverse beautiful natural landscape attracts urban people to spend vacations refreshing and relaxing in rural area. It is so useful of having the reserve of natural and environmental protection, as well as the heritage of rural culture.

Therefore, it is very important for rural villages to adapt itself to the change of agricultural structure and to satisfy the social needs. It includes:

a Production of Abundant Food

Agriculture, forestry and fisheries are producing foods and living materials which are vital for our daily lives.

b Preservation of a Safe and Beautiful Homeland

Forestry and paddy fields are not only serving public functions, such as soil conservation, cultivating water resources and purifying water, but also preserving the beautiful landscape.

c Heritage and Creation of Rural Culture

Activities of agriculture, forestry and fisheries and rural life are both inheriting and creating cultural assets.

d Supply of Relaxing Living Space

Rural areas are supplying us with relaxing living space through rich nature and culture.

(Figure 1)

The roles of agriculture and rural villages have to be adjusted in line with the development of the leisure industry and the goals of rural planning. The goal is to create a beautiful rural environment, improve the conditions and quality of rural living and infuse vitality into rural area to increase its attractiveness, and in the meantime protect its tradition and unique style during social economic growth, helping to change public perception of these areas as dirty and backward. With such efforts, we are able to transform the countryside into desirable places of accommodation and leisure.

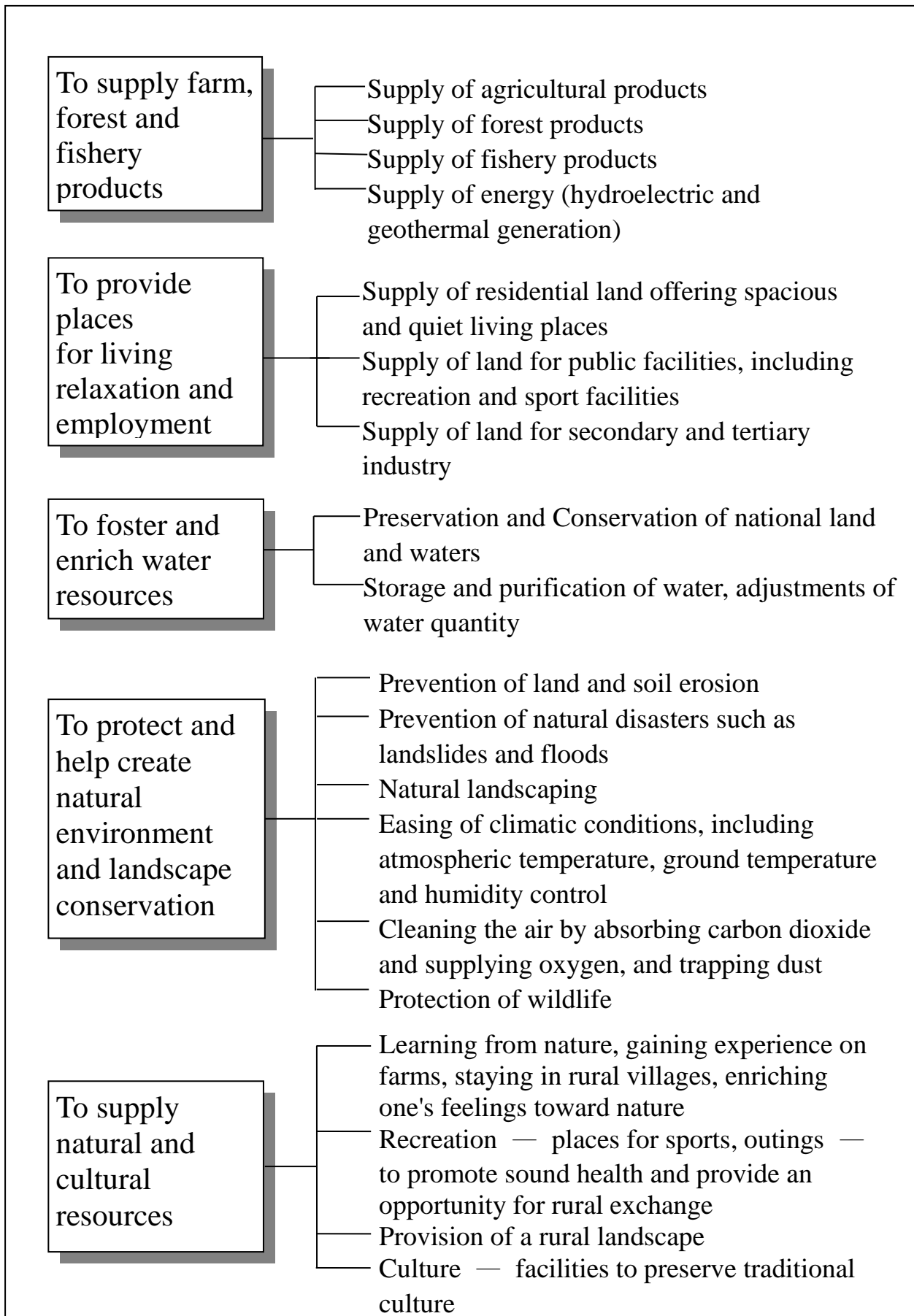


Figure 1: The Important Functions of Rural Areas

C Rural Scenery and Landscape

Rural scenery is an abstract and subjective concept as everyone may already have an idea or an image in his or her mind, but finds it difficult to express it explicitly or arrive at a consensus. According to research, the key components of rural scenery are as follows:

- (a) Views of the villages
- (b) Rural surroundings
- (c) Rural passages
- (d) Rural streets
- (e) Views from the rooftop
- (f) Rural spaces
- (g) Rural buildings
- (h) Frontal views and exteriors of farm houses
- (i) Natural landscapes of rural areas
- (j) Rural construction materials and goods

Among those listed, rural buildings and traditional residential houses are considered the most unique and indigenous landscape, as they blend better with their surrounding environment. They are artificial structures closely tied to the local rural culture.

As can be seen, further understanding of rural scenery and its unique characteristics is one of the priority tasks of rural planning. Rural scenery and landscape can be divided into 3 sections:

a Natural Landscape

- ◆ Rural Green Zone: crop fields, orchards, tea plantations, terraces and other green areas for cultivation purposes, garden parks, nature eco-system conservation areas, all other types of nature areas.
- ◆ Rural Blue Belt: rivers, canals, lakes, drains, waterfalls, ponds and so on.
- ◆ Flora and Fauna: natural forest areas, forest plantations, grasslands, wetlands, rare plants or indigenous plants. Mammals, reptiles, insects (butterflies, fireflies, dragonflies), aquatic animals, birds and so on.
- ◆ Natural Phenomenon: such as caves, cliffs, canyons, snow, sunsets, cloud formations, fogs, moon and stars, seasonal changes.

b Cultural Landscape

- ◆ Local traditional cultural assets: traditional handiwork, such as carving, architecture, traditional handicrafts, folk songs, puppet shows, folk parade display and other special indigenous culture, customs, arts, symbols and images.

- ◆ Local folk festivals and celebrations: temple rituals, lantern festival, local temple assembly, sky lantern celebrations, indigenous rites and rituals, mid-autumn festival dragon boat races and so on.
- ◆ Leisure and sports activities: such as farm fairs, night bazaar, traditional markets, cultural activities, weekend flower markets and so on.

c Man-made Structures

- ◆ Buildings and public facilities: rural houses, traditional residences and artificial structures such as pavilions, lofts, temples, churches, schools, bridges, tunnels and so on.
- ◆ Major landmarks: local symbolic structures such as memorials, city gates, public artworks, fountains and so on.
- ◆ Roads, passages, dams and so on.
- ◆ Open spaces in garden parks and plazas

The rural landscape will undergo a myriad of changes in tandem with changes in the economic and natural environments, as well as the lifestyle of the indigenous population. The artistic, cultural, scenic and recreational values of rural villages ensure the protection of the ecological balance and landscape conservation. The breathtaking scenery, fresh air, pure water sources, unique cultural assets and leisure resources available in the rural area is a huge attraction to people who desire such physical elements, and a major draw to return to nature and countryside.

Hence, it is of utmost importance to discover ways to integrate the special quality of rural areas (landscape resources and culture) with the development of agro-tourism so as to inject vitality into the rural villages.

Boosting Development of Agro-tourism through Rural Planning

D The Functions of Rural Planning

As mentioned earlier, agro-tourism is the integration of agriculture activities, graceful rural space and the cultural and natural elements to achieve a vacation destination that offers great recreational value.

By encouraging citizens to become more involved with rural villages and to experience the lifestyle, their interest and support for the promotion of local agriculture industry will increase. This will also create new income revenue for farmers, helping to achieve the goal of a prosperous rural development.

The main objective of rural planning is to narrow the developmental gap between the rural and urban areas by improving the work conditions and living environment of the villages, ensuring that rural population enjoy similar privileges and quality of life as their city counterparts.

In addition, rural planning helps to reinforce conservation efforts towards nature and the eco-systems, highlighting the precious status of the natural resources and unique scenery of the countryside. Efforts to preserve the integrity of ancient cultural relics and buildings will further enhance the attractiveness of these areas and increase the number of visitors vacationing there.

Hence, it is critical for rural planning to aggressively target efforts at creating conducive conditions for agro-tourism and leisure industry. For instance, vibrant and productive agriculture activities, lovely natural landscape and resources, great living environment that offers service-oriented infrastructure facilities, as well as the preservation of local heritage and cultural practices and so on. Details as follows:

a Development of agro-tourism and rural leisure industry is based on reinforcement of planning and development of rural villages

Rural planning should be reinforced according to the unique characteristics and style of individual region, and through the renewal of the community and construction of residential areas, help farmers to create simple, clean and indigenous farm accommodations that offer tourists a chance to enjoy the surrounding countryside.

The development of agro-tourism not only provide better holiday choices offering serenity, comfort and joy of countryside living, but also bring in tourists dollars that will revive the rural economy and raise farmers' incomes.

b Protection of rural cultural assets is the basis for the attraction of villages

Rural planning should retain the traditional style and unique characteristics of the local area.

The most valuable assets for agro-tourism are qualities such as the diversity and uniqueness of the agriculture industry, the naturally breathtaking landscape, the cultural relics and the complexity and artistic value of rural buildings, the simplicity and authenticity of its culture, the awesome eco-system consisting of wildlife flora and indigenous animals. These are what attract the urban population to the rural areas; hence the process of development and planning should be based on the conservation principles of "Preserving traditional, Spearheading trends".

E Government's Role in Developing Agro-tourism

As mentioned earlier, the uniqueness and attraction of rural villages is central to the development of agro-tourism or the rural leisure industry. For instance, portraying the diversity and uniqueness of the rural landscape and architectural style inherent in communities and gathering sites. Many of the cultural relics and heritage buildings possess great historical value and are an integral part of village life, deserving of conservation.

The essence of rural living lies in its simple lifestyle, hard working and contented people,

and the embodiment of peace and compassion within the community. These are rare characteristics that deserve to be propagated in an increasingly commercialized and industrialized society. In addition, the naturally beautiful environment and landscape created by open grasslands is an ideal backdrop for a unique and more humane lifestyle compared to urban living.

Hence, in tandem with these developmental trends, the government should adjust rural planning to accommodate changes effectively, giving agro-tourism and rural leisure industry the boost it needs. Details as follows:

a Strengthen investments in rural public service sectors and conservation efforts for cultural relics and buildings

Efforts to bolster the public service sector in the villages should be strengthened. This is an important step towards building a better rural environment, providing convenience and quality services to both local population as well as travelers enjoying a getaway in the countryside.

It is critical that more investments are poured into construction of rural public services and recreational facilities for tourists, for example, recreational and sports activity centers, venues for ball games, swimming pools, outdoor camping sites (so call “open air hotels”) , children’s playground, fishing, wadding pools and so on. This would increase the fun and excitement quotient of agro-tourism and offer urban travelers an opportunity to embrace countryside living.

Cultural relics and buildings in the villages are important cultural assets, and symbolize the historical milestones of rural development. They should be preserved and protected. By endeavoring to protect the cultural assets of the villages and highlighting the indigenous roots and heritage, emotional ties are strengthened and become the social glue that holds the community together.

Besides focusing on preserving the landscape, scenery and nature, the planning of infrastructure and public roads such as pedestrian walks and bicycle lanes should not destroy the original look and special characteristics of the place. This includes retaining the native flora and trees species that are huge attractions for tourists.

By the same measures, as required by the development of recreational areas in rural villages, houses are reconstructed; recreational facilities are added to create a nice and attractive leisure environment. In the meanwhile, rural relics and historical sites are preserved, traditional or historical buildings are kept, natural resources are protected, landscape and rural features are conserved so as to retain the unique rural style and continue its own cultural meaning. Only in this way can villages be added attraction for living and recreation.

b Renewal of rural communities and reconstruction of farm residences

In an effort to promote modernization of rural villages and offer tourists the comfort of essential public services and facilities, rural planning should consider both the needs of the community social system and the tourists. On one hand, it should provide a blueprint for the

community's development while pushing for the renewal and reconstruction of the buildings and residences. The aim is to retain the native rural ambience, while improving living conditions and providing tourists a clean and comfortable holiday destination.

One of the approaches to village renewal while retaining the traditional heritage is to imbue old but historical buildings with new roles and functions.

Traditional livestock farms that are in close proximity to residences would have to be moved so as to avoid lowering the quality of the surroundings. This would improve the standard of life and residential environment as well as meet the criteria for a modern agriculture industry, injecting new vitality into the rural areas.

In tandem with the development of agro-tourism and rural leisure, farmers can be persuaded to convert extra rooms into accommodations for tourists, meeting the needs of urban visitors who would like to experience a "farm stay" holiday. This generates new revenue for the farmers. With services ranging from sports venues, camping sites to rental of farm houses, village accommodation, cruise and fishing boats, horses and ox carts, the tourists will not be disappointed.

It is essential to remember that agro-tourist activities today require a considerable initial investment, to satisfy visitors demand and to meet modern standards of comfort and safety.

c Thorough and proper planning of land use

Another important point is that "farm stay" or accommodation alone is not enough to attract a urban visitors. It should be accompanied by activities which tourists will enjoy, and be part of an attractive nature and environment.

Air, water, grasslands and landscapes are the precious resources offered by the agriculture industry and villages. Proper and thorough land use planning is required to avoid the pollution and the destruction of the environment and natural landscape. This relies on regulating the use of rural land by different departments and preventing unhealthy competition for land, as well as stopping unregulated and chaotic expansion of land for industrial use. This would stamp out the problems of pollution and prevent destruction of village production means and living environment.

The goal of transforming rural villages into attractive tourist destinations for urbanites can only be possible with the proper maintenance and protection of the lovely natural landscape and eco-systems. This goal is achieved through proper landscape planning, green efforts within the village communities, as well as the maintenance and preservation of green zones and green belts in peripheral areas. On one hand, green belts such as forest, woods and open plains are kept as oasis for wildlife and plants, while conserving water and soil resources.

On the other hand, efforts should be targeted at treating the rivers and cultivating trees and plants, achieving a natural water system and green environment. In the end, it is to present a flourishing and vibrant rural landscape, comprising countryside scenery and villages, ultimately unlocking the great recreational value in the rural areas.

d Summary: creating rural attractiveness in terms of living and recreation value

With social and economic growth and agricultural structure change, the role played by rural area has more functions. Agriculture is not only the food supply and raw material production process, but also the offer of beautiful landscape and natural environment in the meanwhile. The variety, nature, beauty and individuality of rural views make rural area attractive. Rural areas are also the vacation places where provide urban populations for recreation and relaxation. It is so useful of having the reserve of natural and environmental protection. As a result, it is an important task for rural planning to infuse vitality into rural area and in the meantime protect its tradition and unique style during social economic growth. If we can encourage people to “spend vacation on farms” to support agricultural amusement, farmers will have another source of income.

Though comprehensive rural planning, we could establish rural basic public facility to improve rural working and living conditions. Task focuses of planned construction range from building and renewing houses to establishing basic public and recreation facilities in villages, from construction of village streets, alleys, sports ground, children’s playground, parks and green field, to transportation venues connection and transportation quality improvement with special consideration to the nature of rural area, as well as public activities on environmental protection, etc. In addition, in order to meet the demands of developing vacation spots in rural area, we should design and rebuild houses, increase the number of vacation and relaxing facilities to support landscape planning. Such activities create beautiful relaxing conditions in rural area. In the meantime, these actions will show the rural unique style and the meaningfulness of continuing rural culture. Actions such as these will re-create rural attractiveness by providing living and relaxing environment. These will make the whole society more dependent on rural area, and strengthen farmers’ recognition and sense of belonging to these regions.

As a result, in the course of social and economic development, how to invigorate rural village and preserve its traditional flavors and unique styles has become an important topic for rural development. Efforts should be made to coordinate with agro-tourism and to encourage people to “spend holidays on the farms” during their free time. This can even bring farmers with another channel for making money.

Conclusion

For urbanites living in a highly industrialized society, facing a high-strung lifestyle, hectic work pace and pressure, the desire for more frequent breaks and relaxation is even more compelling. They want to get away from the hustle and bustle, to find a place to help them de-stress and to recharge.

Hence, the desire to seek out nature and recreational activities has grown stronger, especially with higher incomes, convenient traffic and longer leisure time. Opportunities for vacations are also abundant. The advent of agro-tourism is timely as it matches the growing trend in tourism, and rural villages are excellent choices for urbanites to spend their vacation and take a well-deserved break.

The countryside is an excellent choice not only because it enjoys mild climate, unique geographical conditions and beautiful landscape, but also due to the concerted efforts to upgrade the environment, recreational facilities and public service offerings.

On one hand, we should work on preserving the eco-system and protecting our rural resources – air, water, grasslands, beautiful natural landscape as well as scenes of agriculture cultivation, to attract tourists. But on the other hand, we should push aggressively for the renewal of farms and reconstruction of rural residences as a means to provide comfortable yet indigenous accommodations for travelers.

The pursuit of an “affluent” and “natural” rural area is one of the key goals of Taiwan’s vision for the 21st century agriculture sector. Hence, rural planning has to integrate both preservation of villages and development of agro-tourism. This increasing dependence of city dwellers on agriculture and rural areas will create an influx of tourists and raise spending power, in turn carving out a profitable market that helps to achieve the dual purpose of an improved agriculture sector and prosperous rural economy.

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