

Innovative Food Tourism Development Strategies for Sustainability on American Indian Reservations

Kynda Curtis[Ⓐ], Susan Slocum^ᵇ, Trent Teegerstrom^ᶜ, Carol Bishop^ᵈ, and Malieka Landis^ᵉ

^ᵃ*Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Applied Economics, Utah State University,
4835 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT, 84322, USA Email: kynda.curtis@usu.edu*

^ᵇ*Assistant Professor, Department of Tourism and Events Management, George Mason University,
Bull Run Hall 201D, 10890 George Mason Circle, MS 4E5, Manassas, VA 20110*

^ᶜ*Associate Director of Tribal Extension Programs and Extension Specialist,
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Arizona
McClelland Park 301B, 650 N. Park Ave., Tucson, AZ 85721*

^ᵈ*Associate Professor and Extension Educator, Northeast Clark County, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
1897 N. Moapa Valley Blvd., Logandale, NV 89021*

^ᵉ*Research Manager, University Center for Economic Development, University of Nevada, Reno
1664 N. Virginia St., Reno, NV 89557*

Abstract

The goal of this project is to enhance the economic sustainability of agricultural production in Southwest Indian Country through food/agritourism enterprise and supply chain development. This strategy takes advantage of increasing traveler demand for local and heritage foods and activities and the need to diversify Southwest agriculture to increase its resiliency to climate change. Project objectives include assessing tourism behaviors and motivations, assessing the production and marketing needs of tribal food producers, and evaluating various models for incorporating food/agritourism into current operations. Project outcomes will increase business opportunities for tribal members and strengthen tribal economies while preserving traditional tribal customs and knowledge.

Keywords: agritourism, cottage foods, economic development, heritage foods, Southwest Indian Country

[Ⓐ]Corresponding author.

Introduction

The American Indian reservations of the Southwest are rich in natural resources such as uranium, coal, and natural gas, but tribal populations are among the poorest in the country (United Nations, 2007) and American Indian poverty rates are higher than those of any other ethnicity in the United States (27% below poverty; McCartney, Bishaw, and Fontenot, 2013). The Navajo Nation—which occupies portions of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico—is the second largest indigenous population in the United States and comprises the largest area assigned to a Native American jurisdiction. It is estimated that 168,000 individuals live in Navajo Nation, with 82% still speaking the Navajo language and practicing the traditional Navajo lifestyle (Navajo Nation, 2013a). The 2007 Census of Agriculture reports that 43% of the population lives below the poverty line, with an average personal income of just over \$7,000 and an unemployment rate of 42%. While 56% of the Nation have a high school education, only 7% have a college degree (U.S. Census of Agriculture, 2009). Economic opportunity is at the forefront of the Nation’s agenda, which focuses on current economic sectors include mining, tourism, and agriculture. With three million tourist visits each year, the Navajo Nation has recognized tourism as an economic growth strategy (Navajo Nation, 2002).

Agriculture and livestock ownership are recognized as core foundations of Navajo spirituality and economic prosperity (Navajo Nation, 2013b). The Navajo have a long-standing divine connection with the land, and agriculture is considered a gift bestowed by the Holy One. It is estimated that there are over 18,000 Navajo farmers, with more than half of Arizona farms and ranches owned by members of the Navajo Nation (Yurth, 2009). Navajos generate an estimated \$40.5 million in the informal economy, and much of this undocumented income is derived from family-based agriculture and crafts enterprises (Moore, Benally, and Tuttle, 2008). Of the 12,000 farms and ranches, over 11,000 are family or individually managed, and they average less than nine acres in size (U.S. Census, 2009). Over 57% of these farms earn less than \$1,000 per year, with another 19% earning less than \$2,500 per year (U.S. Census, 2009). The Navajo Nation recognizes that there is an urgent need to implement agricultural programs, policies, regulations, and conservation programs to revitalize their economy for self-sufficiency (Navajo Nation, 2002).

In recent years, Native Americans communities in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah have increasingly sought to revive traditional agrarian lifestyles to strengthen the ties of younger Native Americans to their heritage, culture, and religion. The resurgent interest in small-scale crop and livestock operations on reservations is also driven by the desire for healthier foods and the chance to share in the economic opportunities being created by the nation’s growing “local food” movement. Native Americans were the nation’s first agriculturalists, and their knowledge and practices over time have contributed to the success of the U.S. food and fiber industries (Diné, Inc., 2012). However, physical, cultural, and linguistic isolation has prevented most Native American producers from accessing the wealth of production, marketing, management, and financing information and services available to most producers. Failure to access and use these resources is impeding the efforts of Native American producers to benefit from today’s emerging market opportunities for their crops and animals (Diné, Inc., 2012).

American Indian farmers and ranchers provide an important economic base for rural areas in the Southwest. Sustaining agricultural production (e.g., crops, food, livestock) on tribal lands will become progressively more challenging in the future due to decreased water availability, extended droughts, changes in precipitation amounts and timing, surface water availability, and declining groundwater supplies. Close cultural and economic ties to natural resources, geographic remoteness, and economic challenges have led some to characterize American Indian reservations as some of the most vulnerable populations to climate change impacts (U.S. Global Climate Change Research Program, 2014).

For example, Patrick (2013) conducted focus groups with over 200 Navajo farmers and ranchers from 20 chapter houses in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. He identified several recurring challenges facing producers across the Navajo Nation, including limited farming opportunities and low crop yields due to water shortages stemming from enduring droughts and inadequate water storage and distribution infrastructure; soil erosion and poor soil quality due to open ranges, lack of fencing, overgrazing, and depleted organic material; lack of knowledge of modern crop production and risk management practices, limited access to equipment and technical assistance, and lack of knowledge of market and sales opportunities. Livestock (e.g., cattle, sheep, and goat) production and market and sales opportunities are also limited by the poor quality of the animals, again due to lack of knowledge of modern production and risk management practices (Patrick, 2013).

Project Overview

This project seeks to investigate the tourism destination image of Southwest Indian Country and traveler motivations and needs related to food and agritourism; examine the production, distribution, and marketing needs of tribal agricultural producers and small food processors interested in entering agricultural and food tourism; evaluate various models for incorporating food/agritourism into the marketing portfolio of agricultural and food processing operations in Southwest Indian Country; and disseminate study results and information to agricultural producers, food processors, tourism enterprises, and policy makers in Southwest Indian County.

Tourism is vital to economic expansion in Southwest Indian Country. The area is home to a dozen national monuments, tribal parks, and historic sites that draw over 600,000 visitors each year (Cothran, Combrink, and Bradford, 2012). In its Comprehensive Economic Development strategy, the Navajo nation recognized that “Manufacturing and Agriculture are normally considered to be the leading ‘Basic Industries.’ Here, on the Navajo Nation, tourism can be added to the list” (Navajo Nation, 2002, p. 11). In 2011, a study found that the \$112.8 million in tourism spending on Navajo Nation generated a total economic impact (including indirect and induced impacts) of \$143.7 million and supported 1,788 full-time-equivalent jobs (Cothran, Combrink, and Bradford, 2012).

The tourism industry is subject to high economic leakages when nonlocal corporate ownership controls the majority of tourism business (Telfer and Wall, 2000). Slee, Farr, and Snowdon (1997) argue that local food can greatly enhance the economic impact of tourism, leaving a larger percentage of tourism revenue in the local economy. The Navajo Economic Development

Plan (Navajo Nation, 2002) recognizes that “tourism development stands a very good chance of reducing unemployment here. People from all around the world already come to this region. The Nation just has to do a better job of capturing the tourist dollars” (p. 45). This project proposes to increase those indirect effects of tourism by incorporating local food products into the tourism value chain to create additional employment and job opportunities for all tribal members across the region.

Agritourism is a concept that has gained significant attention in recent academic literature. It is recognized as a vehicle that can enhance a destination’s tourism offerings and create backward linkages that generates additional economic opportunities for local residents in tourism destinations (Telfer and Wall, 2000). Especially in areas where farming and food production constitutes a large economic sector, agritourism provides an avenue to promote and distribute local agricultural production while simultaneously providing tourists with a way to explore unfamiliar cultures (Everett and Aitchison, 2008).

According to the Navajo Nation Traditional Agriculture Outreach (Navajo Nation, 2013b), adding value to agricultural products is a priority. Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah are among the over 30 states that have enacted Cottage Food Rules, allowing specific types of nonhazardous foods to be produced in inspected home kitchens. No such rules currently exist among the tribal governments, possibly precluding those located within the reservations from cottage production. Cottage food production would create opportunities for small farms, especially important given the scarcity of restaurants and certified kitchens on the reservations. Familiarizing these residents with current state regulations would allow them to organize and petition their tribal governments to adopt similar regulations if needed.

The advantages of food and agritourism include increased economic opportunity for local farmers in tourism destinations and the enhancement of the visitor experience in relation to the consumption of local food products, recipes, and rural spaces as an experiential form of cultural expression (see Table 1 for overview of activities and products). Agritourism is important in strengthening a region’s identity, sustaining cultural heritage, and supporting a region’s economic and socio-cultural foundation (Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Therefore, community identity and cultural distinctiveness can be expressed through agritourism whilst providing an avenue for economic development (Rusher, 2003). Due to the different attributes of the tourism and agricultural sectors in the economy, many communities have struggled to provide successful best practices that can be easily accessible to small and medium-sized businesses in each sector (Slocum and Everett, 2010).

Project Outcomes and Impacts

Project outcomes are provided in Table 2. Short-term impacts include increased awareness, knowledge, and changes in attitudes related to the capacity and skills of tribal government officials and American Indian farmers and ranchers. Increased knowledge will strengthen the capacity of tribal nations to diversify and establish food and agritourism partnerships, to react successfully to market changes, and to absorb climate change stresses, thus maintaining function of agricultural land and customs.

Table 1. Food and Agritourism Products and Activities.

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|---|--|--|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Agritourism | Farm stays | Farm activities (hay rides, corn mazes) | Pick-your-own | Farm stands | Fishing and hunting |
| Buildings or Structures | Food processing facilities | Wineries and breweries | Farmers' markets | Food stores | Food- related museums |
| Consumer Shows and Festivals | Food and drink shows | Cooking demonstrations | Food festivals | Beer and wine festivals | Harvest festival |
| Consumption | Dining at restaurants | Picnics utilizing locally-grown products | Purchasing retail food/beverages | Tasting local recipes | Food-based souvenirs |
| Touring | Wine regions/routes | Agricultural regions | City food districts | Food routes | Gourmet trails |
| Land uses | Farms | Orchards | Vineyards | Urban restaurant districts | |
| Organizational | Restaurant classification or certification systems | Food/wine classification systems (organic, local) | Associations (e.g. Slow Food) | | |
| Educational | Cooking schools | Wine tasting | Visiting wineries | Food and beverage magazines | |

Notes: Adapted from Everett and Slocum (2013).

Medium-term impacts will identify changes in behaviors of these individuals to coalesce around achieved knowledge gains and proactively plan strategies and policies. Behavioral changes may include, for example, tribal members developing reservation-wide plans for sustainable agriculture that focus on establishing tourism and food/agritourism partnerships and supply chains. They may also include increased and improved use of existing USDA agricultural assistance programs to implement agritourism activities on reservation lands. Long-term impacts will include documented plans and policies that specifically address sustainable agriculture and economic development actions on reservation lands. Targeted impacts will lead to long-term change in economic, social, and environmental conditions on the reservation.

To measure short-, medium-, and long-term impacts, primary and secondary data will be collected prior to, during, and immediately following the project to provide baseline and subsequent data points to monitor targeted changes through the project life. Additionally, data will be collected 12 months following project completion to provide a retrospective evaluation of cumulative project impacts.

Table 2. Project Outcomes/Impacts (Knowledge, Actions, and Conditions).

| <p>Knowledge Occurs when there is a change in knowledge and/or attitude</p> | <p>Actions Occur when there is a change in behavior or the participants act upon what they have learned</p> | <p>Conditions Occur when economic, environmental, or social conditions improve due to actions taken by the participant as a result of their participation</p> |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase producer understanding of tourist preferences for food tourism & agritourism • Increase producer knowledge of tourism outlets & distribution options • Increase producer knowledge of cottage food production & distribution • Increase producer awareness of cultural foods & production methods • Increase producer ability to evaluate the economic feasibility of food and agritourism products/enterprises • Increase producer ability to diversify & adapt to market & climate changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tribal producers investigate diversification opportunities • -Tribal agriculture & food producers create new products or services for tourists/visitors • Tribal communities initiate tourism planning & partnership development • Establishment of tourism & food/agritourism partnerships & supply chains • - Ongoing education, information sharing, & activities involving project partners & USDA agencies to enhance project impacts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable tribal agricultural operations • Improved tribal economic development & business opportunities • Improved partnerships with tribal & non-tribal tourism/food operations • Improved social, environmental, & economic conditions on the reservations • -Sustained tribal traditions & culture • -Enhanced partnerships with 1994 and 1862 college, Extension, & USDA agencies • -Resilient & thriving tribal communities |

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