



BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCING AGRITOURISM AND ECOTOURISM IN LAKE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA



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CLEAR LAKE AGRITOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

INTRODUCTION

Agritourism and ecotourism are both priorities in Lake County for community revitalization. However, it is important to look at these tourism sectors within the larger context of amenity development. Amenities are natural and cultural resources that contribute to a high quality of life. They are the things, experiences, places, or institutions that make a place worth living in or visiting. Amenity development is the cultivation of amenities as assets for economic growth, utilizing strategies to promote tourism and recreational housing, supporting existing residents, and attracting in-migration.

PURPOSE FOR REVIEW IN LAKE COUNTY

The Socioeconomic Subcommittee of the Blue Ribbon Committee for the Rehabilitation of Clear Lake identified agritourism and ecotourism as important aspects of economic vitality in the Clear Lake region. The Subcommittee requested information about what work is being done in this area, what opportunities and challenges exist, and recommendations for moving forward to successfully support this sector of the economy.

METHODS

The CRC's qualitative data collection team, led by Research Data Analyst Carolyn Abrams and Student Researcher Alex Volzer, conducted a total of 13 formal interviews and two informal interviews in 2019. Interviewees answered questions about their economic development vision for the region, with particular attention paid to major drivers of economic change and whether change is welcome and/or needed. The objective of the economic development interviews was to provide insight from stakeholders and situate the conversation within promising practices for holistic community economic development.

The CRC also conducted a virtual focus group in May 2021, led by Carolyn Abrams and Sara Watterson, consisting of stakeholders from various businesses and agricultural resource programs within Lake County. The CRC created the list of stakeholders after consulting with the BRC Socioeconomic Sub-Committee and encouraged those invited to suggest other contacts within their community that should also participate (see Appendix 1.5.2).

Further work on these topics involved a literature review of promising practices in holistic community economic development and amenity development to further support the key findings from both the interviews and focus group.

RESULTS: EMERGING KEY THEMES

Several key themes emerged through the data collection. Although there are varying perspectives across stakeholders for an economic development vision in Lake County, there seems to be the most traction around amenity development and leveraging the agricultural and natural resources of the region. The key informant interviews also revealed many considerations that need to be kept in mind when promoting economic development in Lake County.

Amenity development can offer a valuable strategy for improving socioeconomic conditions in the Clear Lake region

Many of the interview participants agreed that amenity development has the potential to improve community conditions and make tourism more viable in the region. As discussed by the interviewees and focus group participants, Lake County has many opportunities in the tourism industry, including agritourism, ecotourism, hospitality, entertainment, and recreation related to the lake, agricultural and forest environments. At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind that the benefits of amenity development are highly variable for different communities, and the creation of assets for both locals and visitors may at times be in opposition to each other. Furthermore, wages in the tourism and hospitality industries tend to be low and the jobs seasonal, making this an uneven basis for a sustainable economy.

Limited or short-term funding streams prevent information about agritourism and ecotourism offerings from being sustained and promoted

Several focus group participants discussed that substantial work in agritourism and ecotourism has been done before, but the knowledge hasn't transferred to long-term

implementation and scaling up. For example, workshops, tours, and farm trails have been made possible by grants, but these haven't been sustainable funding sources. This typically means that once a grant ends, it is no longer possible to update the available resources, so they become outdated or irrelevant, and the program then fails. For example, there was a farm trail program created through the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Specialty Crop Block Grants, but this resource is in need of an update. Participants discussed that it would take funding to hire someone, and an established organization or nonprofit (such as Sonoma County's Farm Trail) would likely be in a better position to sustain a project of this nature.

Visitors and residents wonder why the beauty of the region isn't promoted

In both the interviews and focus group, much of the discussion centered on ways to elevate the perceptions of Lake County by potential visitors. Residents feel strongly that Lake County is a unique location with attractive amenities and specialized commodities, but there is a lack of public information about the value it affords as a destination.

Participants noted that there is much to gain from marketing the unique natural and cultural assets that Lake County has to offer. It was mentioned that the county has a marketing campaign on Visit Lake County hasn't been very effective. Additional avenues were identified that should be pursued, including promotion through local business associations, agritourism associations, regional tourism councils, or chambers of commerce. In terms of agritourism and ecotourism specifically, leveraging the synergy and coordination among non-competing enterprises in the area would provide more tourist attractions for customers, while concurrently drawing in more foot traffic to the local businesses.

In an effort to promote a place as an attractive tourist destination, it is important to keep in mind that overly successful amenity development can also undermine its own success. Heavy crowds can decrease the quality of enjoyment for amenity-seekers, as well as degrade or over-consume the amenity. Pollution is one of the more common sources of degradation due to the high environmental sensitivity of characteristically high-quality amenities. Traffic congestion, public safety concerns, sprawl, reduced air and water quality, and wildlife disturbance are also common. As noted in the focus group, many of the attractive qualities of the region are tied to the health of Clear Lake, making it imperative for lake restoration and ecosystem preservation to be a priority.

Without protecting local natural resources, agritourism and ecotourism cannot be successful.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

Identify agricultural commodities for export and local tourist consumption, and leverage unique natural resources for recreation and tourism opportunities

Lake County has many natural resources that can be leveraged for economic development, including agricultural goods for export and consumption, the lake, and other unique natural resources and biological conditions that lend themselves to tourism and recreation. The county's burgeoning wine industry and its historical fruit and nut sector make up 95% of the county's agricultural production. The county's 119 organic farms cover 2700 acres and produce \$4.8 million in revenues.

Common strategies for tourism include the development of farm parks (i.e., farms that offer park-like vistas and experiences like camping, restaurants, and petting zoos), woodland parks (i.e., parks that offer educational experiences, walking paths, hiking trails, and campgrounds), turning towns into living history museums (e.g., historical preservation, re-enactments, celebrations of local events), or offering opportunities for outdoor recreation and competitive wilderness sports (e.g., off-roading with 4-wheel vehicles, mountain biking, climbing, fly-fishing).

Agritourism specifically supports enterprises such as farms, ranches, or small-scale growers that allow for visitors to participate in unique activities, learn about the operation of these businesses, and/or enjoy the rural settings of these properties, ultimately generating supplemental income for the owner. Ecotourism typically involves travel to unique destinations for educational, experiential, and environmental purposes. Ecotourism is intended to provide understanding about the human impact on the environment and foster a greater appreciation of flora, fauna, cultural heritage, and natural habitats. For a detailed list of agritourism and ecotourism activities, see Appendix.

Leverage local government policies and planning practices to support a successful tourism sector

Unique city revenue-generating mechanisms are needed to compensate for resident-paid property and sales tax which may not meet the needs for infrastructure and

services to support visitors. Residential population growth rates must be carefully managed to mitigate environmental and social impacts of tourism while other measures must be taken to enable tourism. This includes the use of zoning, general plans, ordinances to allow for events and housing accommodations on properties, protective measures for habitat preservation or restoration, licensing or other fees that funnel back into the economy, and other long-range planning tools.

Community planning and design must also be proactive and intentional to bridge the cultural gaps between long-term residents and newcomers in order to reduce tensions between them. The privatization of prized land and viewsapes to the detriment of existing residents' options for employment and housing must be balanced with public access and thoughtful zoning and planning. Strong local government regulations and a managed growth rate (both commercial and residential) prevents degradation and over-consumption of amenities, undermining the very amenities a local economy is dependent on.

In order to achieve this, there needs to be a broad base of enthusiasm in the community for developing a cohesive tourism strategy. If not, a small group of people may benefit financially while retail goods and services for tourists crowd out local needs. These luxury commercial enterprises like art galleries, cafes, and gift stores often conflict with the needs of the existing community, such as increasing access to grocery stores. At its extreme, locals can become displaced or crowded out of the town to make way for visitors. Participatory, broad based citizen-led decision making on how a community pursues amenity development increases the chances of success. Two examples include Asset-based Community Development (ABCD) strategies or Community-based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR). These approaches value the contributions and participation of local residents, community associations, and other institutions, and ultimately have the potential to develop a mutually beneficial tourism strategy. This can help mitigate social tensions, leading to community pride in the attention that visitors bring and harnessing tourist revenue to support the local economy.

Diversify the local economy

A tourism or amenity dependent economy can create huge risks for the future of a community. First, it can make communities vulnerable to economic swings and crisis from events like recessions or natural disasters. The jobs created by tourism tend to be low-wage, part-time, seasonal, and in the service sector industries. When traditional

sources of employment (such as mining or forestry) threaten the success of tourist destinations and are discouraged, tension and resentment can build. Poor wages in turn can depress local consumption, stressing local retail and municipal government tax revenues. In addition, when beneficiaries of tourism dollars are not locally owned, this draws the financial profits out of the community.

A base economy is necessary for tourism to succeed. Agritourism and ecotourism models can be implemented, expanded, or further resourced in order to promote local industries and support the existing economy. As such, amenity development in a diversified economy is still sensitive to drops in volume of tourists, but the local economy will not suffer a severe shock if visitation dries up for a period of time due to recessions or natural disasters.

Change the narrative about Lake County and the Lake region as a draw for tourists

Common interview and focus group themes centered on the branding and marketing of Lake County. In order to effectively capture what the region has to offer, the county will need to be intentional about promoting the value of local place-based offerings and elevating the perceptions of the region.

The community should advertise the notable qualities of the region without selling an inauthentic version of itself. The risk that comes with promoting a place is that communities can lose control of their identity in the name of tourist dollars. However, a community with a plan to protect regional icons or resources is less likely to have a developer purchase rights to that icon or resource (e.g., lakefront property, historical buildings, established businesses) and then renovate them to meet the needs of tourists over locals. Locally owned small businesses need to be positioned to capture the majority of tourist dollars, allowing wealth to stay within the community rather than siphoned away via absentee ownership.

Overall, it will be extremely important to develop a marketing plan for the county that looks at the target population the county wants to reach and what specifically is being promoted to attract visitors (e.g., goods, services, experiences). As noted by many of the focus group participants, valuable marketing is often word-of-mouth from satisfied customers. Additionally, the ability to leverage social media to promote quality products, services, and experiences is critical to promoting businesses and local attractions. According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, “New customers grow your business; satisfied repeat customers sustain and market your business to another wave

of new customers.” In order to achieve this, visitors need to be engaged, develop a sense of belonging to a place, and leave with an experience that’s memorable enough to refer to others and return again.

APPENDIX

Interview participants

The formal interviews consisted of 13 participants, with geographic representation from both incorporated and unincorporated communities in Lake County.

Focus Group attendees

Businesses, organizations, and programs represented from Lake County include Six Sigma Ranch, Peace and Plenty Farm, Clear Lake Campground, Lake County Farmers Finest, the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, and Lake County UC Cooperative Extension.

Examples of agritourism and ecotourism

Agritourism and ecotourism span a multitude of activities related to outdoor recreation, education, accommodations, retreat getaways, and entertainment. A few examples include:

- Retreat centers
- Nature centers
- Farm tours
- Farm-based lodging
- Children's educational day camps
- Country overnight bed and breakfasts
- Bird and wildlife watching
- Backpacking and hiking
- Petting farms
- Hands-on you pick farms
- Wineries and vineyard tours
- Horseback rides, hayrides, and vintage tractor rides
- Farmers markets
- Rural weddings
- Glamping
- Photo safaris
- Flora and fauna tours
- Astrology events and observations

Successful agritourism models and resources

California Agricultural Tourism Directory, <http://www.calagtour.org/>

UC Small Farms Research and Extension, <http://sfp.ucdavis.edu>

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center: Agritourism,
<https://www.agmrc.org/commodities-products/agritourism>

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center: Organizations Supporting Agritourism:
<https://www.agmrc.org/commodities-products/agritourism/organizations-supporting-agritourism>

Lake County Farmers Finest, <http://www.lakecountyfarmersfinest.org/>

Capay Valley Farm Trail Map, http://capayvalleygrown.net/wp-content/uploads/CVFTM_8.5x11_revised.pdf

Sacramento Wine and Nightlife Tours,
<http://sacramentowinetours.weebly.com/clarksburg.html>

Apple Hill Growers Association, <https://applehill.com/>

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