

Tapping Into Tourism

Ever dream of bringing more dollars to your farm or ranch by hosting tourists interested in wildlife, nature or agriculture? Here's advice on what to consider before getting into the business.

by *Kindra Gordon*

The idea isn't new: Charge tourists a fee for access to private property on farms and ranches, so they get a chance to do what they want — hunt, fish, hike, etc. — while you make some extra income.

But, what is unprecedented is the expanding interest from tourists for these agritourism opportunities (also called nature tourism or ecotourism). Many believe the boom is linked to fewer people growing up with rural roots and eventually seeking a respite in nature from their fast-paced, often stressful, urban lifestyles. As a result, the ag community is responding with tourism-based businesses in many forms — from the traditional fee hunts for deer and pheasants to out-of-the-box ideas such as concerts in the prairie, stargazing and even exotic game hunts.

So, does establishing an agritourism business hold potential for you? There are lots of considerations before you dive in, say those in the business.

Begin by evaluating

One of the first steps in determining if your property lends itself to agritourism is to evaluate its potential. Knowing and interpreting your resources in clear, interesting and relevant ways is critical, says Desmond Jolly, an ag economist who also serves as director of the University of California, Davis Small Farm Center, which is dedicated to assisting farmers in finding value-added opportunities.

By definition, Jolly says, agritourism refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment,

education or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation.

That said, begin with assessing the potential attractions that already exist on your property, rather than spending money to create something new.

For instance, consider land resources such as rangelands, woodlands, meadows, streams and ponds and what they may offer, as well as wildlife, fishing, livestock and proximity to natural or man-made points of interest.

Also, evaluate the activities on your operation that might appeal to a visitor. Remember, what seems routine to you may be considered unusual and interesting to the nonfarm public. Some examples might include cattle drives, calving or lambing, trail rides, roadside produce stands, machinery operations (harvesting, planting, cultivating), or on-site food processing.

As an additional consideration, Jolly points out that nature-based tourism businesses should also try to work closely with local community leaders and resource managers for a community-wide approach.

Service first

If you intend to start an agritourism business, you'll need to focus on customer service, say veterans in the business. Just as with any business, happy customers are the most important key to success.

"This is the people business. If you don't like people, it's not for you," says Brent Hackley of Richards Ranch, a cow-calf operation that was established in 1865 near Jacksboro, Texas.

In 1999, Hackley, who is the sixth

generation on the ranch, added nature tourism opportunities to the ranch along with the help of his parents, his wife and their two children. They began with limited fee hunting and fishing, and today also offer guided ranch and heritage tours, hiking, hayrides, and other outdoor activities. The ranch also offers a guest lodge, cabins, and a pavilion for large gatherings and events.

Of their foray into tourism, Hackley says the primary motivation was really for the long-term viability of the ranch. "The Richards Ranch has been in the family for 140 years, and that's not long enough for me. We are trying to utilize all of our resources. We are planning for and taking care of our future, and that's why we do it."

Additionally, he says, "We saw this as an opportunity to educate urban people about ranching and agriculture, and we feel a responsibility to do that. That is becoming increasingly important today, especially when urban folks go to the polls to vote."

In the six years since adding tourism to the ranch, Hackley says it has been a learning experience. "You have no idea how much time and energy it takes to be in the nature tourism industry," he says. "You always strive to keep the customer happy, and a lot of time you do the work yourself because you can't afford to hire staff"

Hackley has also learned you can't be all things to all people. "We started with a wide net to catch all the dollars, but have since narrowed our focus. You can't be inflexible. You need to make changes with experience and figure out what realistically works best for you."

What tourists want

In establishing a tourism-based business, one should understand what people want from their vacation. This can help assess the opportunities on your property for various recreational enterprises. According to a survey conducted by the University of California, tourists want the following items.

■ **To build and strengthen relationships.** Respondents to this survey ranked the No. 1 reason for going on vacation as being together as a family. This really isn't surprising, as families today have little time to be alone together. Thus, they seek vacations to get away from the stress of home and work and to rekindle relationships.

■ **To improve health and well-being.** The vast majority of adults surveyed also said a vacation is vital to their family's physical and mental well-being. And, many expressed that they want to refresh and renew themselves by actively participating in outdoor activities.

■ **To have an adventure.** Many travelers look to vacations for exciting experiences that stir emotions. Adventure, whether dangerous or romantic, provides the heightened sensation that these consumers seek. Many expressed that they travel because they are looking for something different: a better climate, prettier

Don't be afraid to charge

Those with experience in agritourism say they've also found it is important to cater to "high-end" customers, and don't be afraid to charge for your service.

Mike and Debbie Arrington of Canadian, Texas, whose nearly 100-year-old home was featured in the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*, have turned their home into a bed and breakfast, along with offering wildlife viewing, photography, tours and hiking on their ranch.

Debbie says initially they set their room rates fairly low. Some visitors were apprehensive at first, thinking it wouldn't be a nice place because it was inexpensive. She quickly learned that if you charge more for your service, people are actually more willing to try the experience.

"You don't have to be upscale, but you do need to offer a quality experience," she says.

The Arringtons have also learned that people don't necessarily come to fish or ride a horse or tractor. They come to have fun and relax, and they want an enjoyable experience. "Visitors don't need to be entertained at every moment. They are willing to pay for privacy and a place to rest and relax," Debbie says.

To expand their income opportunities, the Arringtons host events and tour groups on their ranch, but Debbie doesn't try to do the cooking. Instead, she teams up with a local caterer to provide meals for these events.

"I like to see others in our community get a piece of the tourism pie, too," she says.

Additional details

Final tips for designing a successful tourism-based business come down to details. Here are some guidelines:

- Make sure your telephone is answered professionally, such as by saying, "Anderson Ranch," rather than just saying, "Hello." Your answering machine should have a professional message as well, and be sure to return calls promptly.

- Let your neighbors know about your business. Join the local chamber of commerce, and talk to owners of gas stations, cafés, clubs, motels and neighboring farms. Make sure people in your area know about your business and have your brochure. Advertise in the telephone book. Put signs on your property that are visible from the road. Make sure people can find you and have a way to contact you.

- Send information about your business to magazines and newspapers in your target markets. Send them news releases and story ideas. Invite them out for a free stay or visit.

- Produce quality brochures and public relations materials. Use good photos, provide detailed information, and always include contact names and phone numbers. Hire a graphic artist, or get lots of feedback from other business people, before you go to print. A color brochure is costlier than a black-and-white brochure, but it shows a commitment to quality and attracts a lot more attention.

- Develop a mailing list. Get names of people who like outdoor activities from outdoor magazines, associations and other sources. Include mailings to past customers, and follow up with personal calls.

- Have liability insurance coverage. Jolly says insurance is not required for an agritourism operation, but you are taking a huge risk if you don't have coverage.

"If something happens to someone while visiting your place and you do not have liability insurance, you risk losing your entire operation," he says. He adds that if an operator completes a risk assessment on his operation and develops a plan to mitigate those risks, liability insurance rates decrease.

Agritourism ideas

Ag-related tourism can range from simple to exotic. Here's a varied list of the options:

- Bird-watching/wildlife-viewing
- Nature photography/painting
- Game preserves
- Fee hunting or fishing
- Camping/picnicking
- Hay/sleigh rides
- Horseback riding
- Cross-country skiing
- Archery ranges
- Trap and skeet shooting
- Off-road vehicles (ATVs, mountain biking)
- Rock collecting/arrowhead hunting
- Hiking/cave exploring
- Tubing and rafting
- Garden tours (dried flowers, herbs, native plants)
- Historical ag/machinery exhibits
- Roadside produce stands
- Operations where produce can be picked
- Harvest festivals or fairs
- Farmers' markets
- Corn mazes
- Ag food and craft shows
- Habitat improvement projects
- Barn dances
- Bed & breakfasts
- Farm/ranch vacations
- School and educational tours
- Petting zoos
- Exotic animal farms
- Children's camps (summer or winter)
- Farm or ranch work experience (roundup, haying, fencing, calving, cutting wood, etc.)
- Family reunions, corporate picnics
- Ranch rodeos
- Concerts or special events

With time and creativity, you can expand your recreation enterprise. Consider fun, entertaining activities such as contests, adult and children's classes, or games ranging from guessing how many apples are in a barrel to horseshoe throwing and bake-offs. Children love straw mazes, pumpkin painting and scarecrow making. Adults may enjoy historic displays or classes on painting or herbs. The sky is the limit!

scenery, slower pace of life, cleaner air, quieter surroundings, or anything else that is missing or deficient in their lives back home.

- **To gain knowledge.** The survey found learning and discovery are strong motivators for today's better-educated travelers. People travel to learn or practice a language, study a culture, explore gourmet foods or wines, investigate spirituality, or discover something about themselves. They want to see, touch or feel something unfamiliar.

- **To mark a special occasion.** Some travelers take vacations to celebrate milestones in their lives: new relationships, marriages,

anniversaries, birthdays or professional achievements. Many people also travel to reminisce and relive fond memories. In the case of agritourism, some vacationers, especially older travelers, will choose a farm visit to rekindle memories of the simple, rural lifestyle they remember from childhood.

- **To save money or time.** Although going on vacation almost always costs money and time, where one goes on vacation can influence costs. By traveling close to home, or taking a short vacation, travelers can save time and money, making agritourism ventures a friendly alternative.