

# Agritourism Potential in Anuradhapura: Exploring Opportunities and Challenges for Sustainable Rural Development

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## Abstract

This study investigates agritourism development in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Data from farmers, tourists, local residents and an agricultural professional in Dunudambuwewa and Saliyapura reveal strong tourist demand for authentic farming experiences and high local willingness to participate, driven by needs for income diversification. The study concludes that the potentials in agritourism in Anuradhapura's is substantial but underutilized, constrained primarily by a critical skills gap in hospitality, deficient infrastructure, and a lack of integrated policy. The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions in these areas to effectively transform the region's agricultural heritage into a sustainable tourism asset, thereby strengthening rural economic resilience.

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**Keywords:** Agritourism, Authentic Farming Experiences, Economic resilience, Sustainable Tourism

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## Introduction

Agritourism has emerged globally as a significant strategy for rural development, enabling farmers to diversify income while offering tourists authentic recreational and educational experiences (Lamie et al., 2021). Originating from models like Italy's *agriturismo*, its growth is driven by urban demand for rural authenticity and the need for agricultural resilience. In Sri Lanka, a country with a rich agricultural heritage and a thriving tourism sector, this potential remains largely untapped (Malkanthi, 2011). The sector is characterized by a limited number of privately owned sites, with benefits often failing to reach rural farming communities. Anuradhapura is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with a substantial tourist influx and a district deeply rooted in ancient agricultural traditions, including historic tank based rice cultivation. Despite this synergy, there is a notable absence of structured initiatives to integrate its cultural tourism with its agrarian economy. On the other hand, local farmers continue to face challenges, including seasonal income variation, small landholdings, and climate vulnerabilities, and the opportunity to leverage tourist interest for community benefit is often missed. This disconnect underscores a significant gap in both practice and localized research. Therefore, this study aims to systematically analyse the specific challenges and opportunities for developing Anuradhapura as an agritourism destination, seeking to provide an evidence based framework that bridges its agricultural heritage with sustainable tourism development.

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## Objective/s of the Study

### General Objective

- To explore how Anuradhapura can be transformed into an agritourism destination.

### Specific Objective(s)

- To identify the key factors that determine the potential for developing agritourism destinations.
- To examine the key challenges and opportunities influencing the development of agritourism.

## Literature Review

Agritourism, at its core, involves the intersection of agriculture and tourism. Lamie et al., 2021 highlight this variability, observing the absence of a single, universally accepted definition. However, the essence of agritourism lies in the connection between the tourist experience and agricultural activities on a working farm or agricultural setting. According to Phillip et al., 2010, agritourism can be distinguished from other rural tourism by requiring visitor participation in actual farming activities. Streifeneder, 2016 further refines this, emphasizing that authentic agritourism distinguishes itself from other forms of rural tourism by prioritizing the agricultural activities of a working farm. This distinction is crucial, as it separates genuine agricultural experiences from tourism activities merely located in rural settings.

The significance of agritourism extends beyond mere tourism diversification. It plays a vital role in rural development, offering economic, social, and cultural benefits. As noted by Allayorovich, 2024, agritourism can be a tool for improving the economic conditions of rural areas. It provides farmers with additional income streams, helping to sustain agricultural operations that might otherwise struggle (Rambodagedara et al., 2015a). Tsai (2007) discusses how, in Taiwan, rural tourism has helped farmers adapt to economic shifts, highlighting its role in agricultural transformation. Furthermore, the preservation of local culture and traditions is often intertwined with agritourism, as these elements become part of the attraction for tourists, as Gede & Putra, 2023 suggests in the context of Subak in Bali. Buchari et al., 2024 highlight community empowerment as a key strategy in developing agritourism villages.

Globally, the terminology used to describe agritourism varies significantly, with Italy's "agriturismo" being legally defined, while other regions use terms like "farm tourism" or "rural tourism" (Lamie et al., 2021). The historical context is linked to broader trends, where agritourism emerged as traditional farming faced economic pressures from globalization (Tsai, 2007; Rambodagedara et al., 2015b). Successful models, such as the "Red Rooster" program in South Tyrol, Italy, mentioned by Lamie et al., 2021 underscore the importance of quality standards and certifications. Best practices inferred from these models include authenticity, quality control, and diversification of farm income (Streifeneder, 2016; Phillip et al., 2010; Lamie et al., 2021).

In Sri Lanka, agritourism is still in a nascent stage. Malkanthi, 2011 noted that, as of the time of the research, only fifteen agritourism places were functioning in the country, offering general services and facilities, with many operated by private companies and outside investors. Rambodagedara et al., 2015b indicate that while Sri Lanka has the potential for agritourism, it is not yet a popular or established practice. Challenges include low visitor numbers, short lengths of stay, and a failure to offer compelling experiences (Malkanthi, 2011). However, there is significant potential for agritourism growth in Sri Lanka. Allayorovich, 2024 suggests a need to assess the current landscape and growth potential for attracting international tourists. The increasing interest in experiential travel and sustainable tourism suggests a growing market. Strategies for transformation include developing a wider range of activities,

improving infrastructure, and providing training for farmers to enhance their hospitality skills (Sjarif et al., 2024). This study addresses the critical gap in understanding and leveraging Anuradhapura's unique agricultural assets within this framework.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to conduct an in-depth exploration of the potential for agritourism development in Anuradhapura. The methodology was selected for its capacity to provide rich, detailed insights into the complex perceptions and experiences of diverse stakeholders. The research focused on four key stakeholder groups identified as central to the agritourism ecosystem: local farmers, local residents, tourists, and agricultural professionals. A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to engage participants from two strategically selected Grama Niladhari Divisions (GNDs) Dunudambuwewa and Saliyapura which were chosen for their contrasting agricultural profiles and proximity to tourist circuits. The final sample consisted of 38 participants, comprising 20 farmers, 11 local residents, 6 international tourists, and 1 agricultural professional.

Data collection was carried out using two primary methods to ensure comprehensive data triangulation. The primary instrument was a set of structured, open-ended questionnaires, which were specifically tailored to each stakeholder group to elicit detailed responses on perceptions, challenges, and opportunities. Concurrently, participatory field observations were conducted, employing systematic visual surveys, GPS mapping, and photographic documentation to capture on ground conditions related to farming practices, physical infrastructure, and cultural landscapes. All data collection was executed personally by the researcher, with questionnaire sessions conducted in local languages and responses documented in real time via mobile notes, while adhering to strict ethical protocols including verbal consent and participant anonymity.

The subsequent data analysis followed a rigorous qualitative process using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis framework. This involved systematic progression from data familiarization and initial code generation to the identification, review, and definition of overarching themes. The questionnaire data formed the core material for the thematic analysis, providing direct insights into stakeholder perceptions. Meanwhile, the field observations provided crucial contextual evidence that enriched the interpretation of these themes, particularly in validating reported infrastructural deficits, understanding farming practices and documenting the physical landscape that would form the basis of agritourism experiences. Furthermore, the observational data were instrumental in validating potentials for agritourism in Anuradhapura (such as proximity to tourist attractions, physical resources and infrastructure), providing on ground proof factors that were also emerging from the questionnaire responses. This integrated methodological approach ensured a robust and structured interpretation of the verbal and observational data, allowing for the emergence of key patterns related to the core research objectives of identifying agritourism potential, challenges, and strategic opportunities in the study region.

## Results and Discussion

This study identified a multifaceted set of factors, challenges, and opportunities that collectively shape the agritourism potential of Anuradhapura. The findings are structured around the research objectives, integrating results to provide a clear pathway for development of agritourism.

### ***Key Factors Determining Agritourism Potential***

The analysis revealed that a convergence of demand, community readiness, and specific locational assets drives the potential for agritourism. A predominant theme was the demand for authentic visitor

experiences. Tourists expressed a significant interest in immersive activities, with a clear desire for "participating in rice cultivation activities" and "learning about organic farming." Furthermore, the desire for culinary immersion, with tourists praising "the different kinds of curries are amazing," highlights an opportunity to leverage local food systems as a core attraction.

Simultaneously, the data demonstrated high community readiness and motivation. Farmers and residents overwhelmingly cited the pursuit of "additional income" as their primary incentive. They had clear conceptions of their roles, suggesting offerings like "farm tours and educational experiences" and "providing accommodation (homestay)." This eagerness is a significant asset for any development initiative.

Crucially, participatory field observations grounded these perceptions in physical reality, confirming key assets and identifying the gap aligned with established agritourism success factors. The studies confirmed strategic advantages such as proximity to tourist circuits near Wilpattu National Park and the Sacred City, the presence of core agricultural resources including productive paddy fields and historic irrigation systems.

### ***Key Challenges and Opportunities Influencing Development***

The findings reveal a landscape rich with potential yet constrained by significant, systemic barriers. The most critical challenge identified was the capacity and knowledge gap. Both farmers and residents frequently cited a "lack of knowledge/training in hospitality or tourism," with the agriculture professional recommending "Training in tourism and resort management". This was the single most critical constraint identified across stakeholder groups.

Through the study, the nine decisive factors validated success. A critical finding was that while core resources like paddy fields and irrigation systems are present, tourism specific infrastructure is a critical constraint. The community explicitly highlighted the "Lack of infrastructure (e.g., roads, transportation)" as a primary challenge. Furthermore, the request from the community for "knowledgeable officers as mediators" proves that strong networks and partnerships are not yet established but are recognized as essential.

Conversely, a primary opportunity lies in economic diversification and value chain enhancement. Farmers saw agritourism as a vital buffer against agricultural volatility. The willingness of over half the farmers to sell "locally produced goods (e.g., rice, fruits, sweet corn, handicrafts)" directly to tourists presents a chance to shorten the supply chain, allowing farmers to capture greater value.

As discussed above, the significant challenge is the infrastructural deficit, which directly impacts accessibility. However, this is paired with the opportunity for cultural preservation. The research found that agritourism is perceived as a way to ensure "traditional methods can be preserved." By transforming practices like tank irrigation into experiential products, the model creates economic value while safeguarding cultural knowledge.

### ***Synthesis and Implications for Development***

The analysis confirms that bridging the gap between agricultural tradition and the modern tourism economy requires a structured intervention. The findings clearly point to several priority areas for any future development initiative. The paramount need is for community capacity building to address the critical skills gap in hospitality and management. Furthermore, significant investment in physical infrastructure, particularly road access and basic amenities, is a non-negotiable prerequisite. Finally, the study underscores the necessity for policy integration and strategic partnerships to provide the financial support and institutional framework that the community currently lacks. These identified needs provide a

clear, evidence based agenda for stakeholders aiming to leverage agritourism for sustainable rural development in Anuradhapura.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Anuradhapura possesses significant agritourism potential, yet its realization is hindered by critical barriers. The convergence of tourist demand for authenticity and community readiness for economic diversification provides a strong foundation. However, the skills gap, infrastructural deficits, and policy disconnect require a structured intervention. The study's key contribution lies in its empirical identification of the critical determining factors and the systemic barriers that constrain agritourism development. The findings provide a foundational understanding and a clear set of priorities namely community capacity building, infrastructural investment, and policy support for stakeholders seeking to leverage agricultural heritage for sustainable tourism. This analysis offers a valuable evidence base for designing future interventions aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods and diversifying the regional tourism offering in Anuradhapura and similar agrarian contexts.

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