



Photo: K. Probst

## What is agrotourism?

Agrotourism is the form of tourism which capitalizes on rural culture as a tourist attraction. It is similar to ecotourism except that its primary appeal is not the natural landscape but a cultural landscape. If the attractions on offer to tourists contribute to improving the income of the regional population, agrotourism can promote regional development. To ensure that it also helps to conserve diversity, the rural population itself must have recognized agrobiodiversity as valuable and worthy of protection.

There are a range of other forms of rural tourism which are not necessarily a part of agrotourism in the strict sense - e.g. ethnotourism, project tourism, health tourism, historical tourism, cultural tourism or adventure tourism. The term 'agro-ecotourism' is generally synonymous with 'agrotourism'.

## Cultural landscapes with tourist appeal

On every continent, farmers have developed a wealth of crop-plant species and varieties as well as livestock breeds. They have adapted plants and animals to meet ever-changing breeding objectives - for new sites and climatic conditions, for different purposes, and to suit individual preferences. This has resulted in a suitable variety or breed for just about any terrain. Small-scale, diverse cultural landscapes emerged, hand in hand with the many distinct forms of management. In the last 150 years, this trend has been reversed: throughout this time, diversity has been diminishing while specialized agriculture is dominated by monocultures and uniformity.

But in this process, valuable genetic characteristics are lost, for example high fertility or robustness, disease or pest resistance. The most effective way to put a stop to the genetic erosion process is to keep old varieties and breeds in use. However, farmers must be given incentives for *in situ* conservation: agrotourism is a way of doing so.

An advantage of this approach is that rural areas are popular destinations for holidays and excursions, particularly cultural landscapes which still give a glimpse of how past ►

## Agrotourism

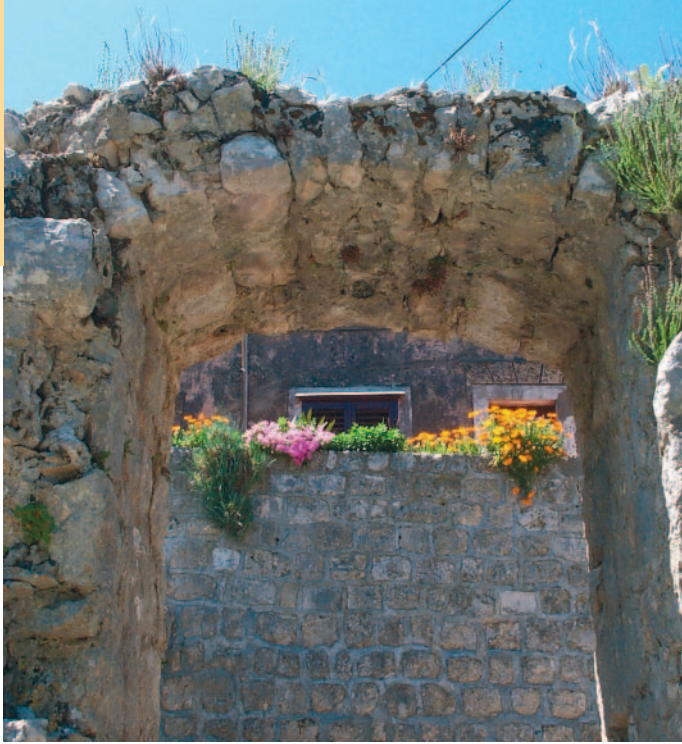


Photo: E. Otto

- ▶ generations lived and worked. Typical regional crops and local breeds become a particular attraction for tourists. This generates additional income for farmers and contributes to the conservation and development of the whole region.

### Symbiotic communities, old and new

The Lüneburg heathlands (Lüneburger Heide) are just one example. Located between the three cities of Hamburg, Bremen and Hanover in Northern Germany, the heathlands are a popular day-trip for city-dwellers, not least because of the heidschnuck sheep, which have been a feature of the landscape for centuries. Although sheep farming here has long since become unprofitable, the animals still graze on the heathland hills - they keep the forest at bay. If the sheep go, the heath will go too, and the tourists along with it. Today they come not only to enjoy the landscape, but also the local heathland honey, buckwheat cake and heidschnuck roasts. Agrotourism is an important economic cornerstone for the whole region.

In past centuries, too, when heathland farmers toiled to eke out an existence from the sparse sandy soils, survival of the local population depended on their symbiotic relationship with the heath and the heidschnuck sheep. This extremely hardy breed of sheep was the only one that could cope with the meagre grazing. For a long time, no attempt was made to improve the breed because there was no prospect of better feed.

The heathland flora and fauna first became a tourist attraction as fashions changed and travellers began to appreciate the landscape. In fact, until well into the 19th century people tended to fear the heath as a 'wild' and 'barren' place.

### Early days

In developing countries, there are only a few examples of local livestock breeds or plant varieties becoming an attraction for tourists. In Costa Rica, the Criollo horses are a special local breed and a feature of the riding holidays offered in the region. In southern Africa, visitors can ride the Lesotho ponies. The 'seed markets' - *ferias de semillas* - held in the highlands of Peru and Bolivia, where women offer their own varieties of potatoes and other crop plants for sale, also attract tourists.

Using a region's particular agrobiodiversity to attract tourists is usually just one component of the projects set up there. In the oases of the Maghreb, for instance, efforts are being made to conserve the diversity of date palms through participatory use and the conservation of plant genetic resources. This Global Environment Facility (GEF) project is aiming particularly at the opening up of new markets - including in the tourist regions of Morocco and Tunisia.

Agrotourism elements are also found in adventure or culture parks. In Malaysia, an 'agricultural park' measuring over 1,000 hectares has been opened, showing visitors how Malaysian agriculture has developed. There is an arboretum with native fruit varieties. Small demonstration plots are reserved for the cultivation of traditional plant species and varieties. A large part of the park is used for agroforestry.

Large-scale conservation areas, designated first and foremost for the conservation of wild plants, animals and ecosystems, are another setting in which cultural landscapes and their diversity can be conserved. Biosphere reserves in particular represent a conservation strategy that expressly includes people and sustainable, often traditional, methods of husbandry. They contribute to the *in situ* conservation of typical regional agricultural diversity of varieties and breeds. Products from these environmentally benign production systems can be sold as unprocessed or processed goods at markets, to restaurants and hotels or directly to tourists.

## Getting started

A number of conditions must be met in order to allow the development of (agro) tourism. These include:

- ◆ A largely authentic natural or small-scale, richly structured cultural landscape. The attractions of large-scale monocultures are rather limited.
- ◆ In addition to the beauty of the landscape itself, it is important to have other cultural, historical or natural attractions.
- ◆ Good transport links, because even attractive regions can be almost impossible to market for tourism if they are not easily accessible from the population centres.
- ◆ A certain level of infrastructure must be in place: e.g. transport, accommodation and catering facilities.
- ◆ Stable political conditions: this is essential for marketing even major tourist attractions.
- ◆ Acceptance among the population: local people must be in favour of tourism.

## A region – a concept

The diversity and genetic traits found in agriculture are worth protecting in their own right, and not just because they will be needed for future breeding programmes. The wealth of crop plants and livestock breeds is also a valuable part of the cultural heritage. When a region is conscious of this, it can use typical regional breeds and varieties alongside other cultural assets and tourist attractions to promote itself. Even if plants and animals are only a subsidiary attraction, they still help create or reinforce regional identity.

The more unusual the breed or variety, the more suitable it will be for promotional use. But less spectacular examples of agricultural diversity can also make their mark on a region's traditional cuisine. Local restaurants and hotels can put these specialities on their menus. Diversity is particularly interesting to tourists when it appears in its socio-cultural context. In other words, products are not simply on sale, but the visitors' experience is enriched by seeing old production processes, traditional crafts or special festivities in action. All this must be integrated into the region's overall marketing concept.



Photo: A. v. Lossau

Hainan, China

## Identify appealing aspects of diversity

Carefully planned agrotourism can make a contribution to in-situ conservation of animal and plant genetic resources. Greater efforts are therefore needed to identify interesting animal breeds and plant varieties and explore their potential for agrotourism in developing countries and countries with economies in transition. At the same time, traditional knowledge must be gathered on the management and use of these breeds and varieties. This not only helps to raise the population's awareness of the value of agrobiodiversity, but it is also indispensable for the long-term conservation of diversity.



Photo: E. Otto

## Further information

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**SAVE Foundation (Safeguard for Agricultural Varieties in Europe):** [www.save-foundation.net](http://www.save-foundation.net)

The document is a working paper. We will improve it in a step-by-step process, building upon your comments and experience.

### Imprint

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