

First Place, 7th – 9th Grade Essay

Agritourism: Connecting Alabama Farms and Communities

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Agritourism is, simply put, the combination of two of Alabama's most important industries: agriculture and tourism. When the word agriculture is mentioned in conversation, images of cows, sows, and plows immediately come to mind. When tourism is mentioned, thoughts of Alabama's sugar sand beaches come racing into focus. For these industries to be so vastly different, the question raises itself, "what is agritourism and how does it connect Alabama farms and communities?". Through agritourism, farmers and ranchers establish new opportunities to market their agricultural products, and consumers may identify new sources of educational and family-friendly entertainment. Agritourism is mutually beneficial and works to connect Alabama farms and communities.

A traditional example of agritourism is the operation of "U-pick" operations. Historically, these operations allowed consumers to pick their own locally-grown produce for a reduced cost. For generations, consumers would make picking produce a part of their summer traditions. However, in recent years, "U-pick" operations have experienced tremendous growth and diversification. Moonflower Farms is a "U-pick" flower farm perched atop Sand Mountain in Fort Payne, Alabama. Moonflower Farms invites customers from all walks of life to their farm to spend a day among the flowers, picking their favorites to display proudly in their home. According to their website, "In mid-March to early April, our field will feature 20,000 tulips of different colors and varieties. Summertime brings popular zinnias, sunflowers, dahlias, strawflower, celosia, cosmos, amaranth, gladiolus, ageratum, and a host of fillers." (Moonflower Farms, 2020). Not only may customers support local agriculture, they also are experiencing agriculture firsthand, gaining a deeper appreciation of the industry and the important role it plays in Alabama's economy. By participating in agritourism, consumers and farmers are connecting Alabama farms and communities.

By establishing opportunities for consumers to visit farms and experience agriculture firsthand allows for a deeper, more thorough appreciation of the industry. When consumers are allowed to gain hands-on experience in the practices by which their food is produced, they are able to purchase more confidently, knowing the food they are purchasing is safe, healthy, and nutritious. Michaela Sanders of Blue Ribbon Dairy strives daily to show consumers the practices behind the gallon of milk they purchase. Per Blue Ribbon Dairy's website, bottle calves are fed daily and the public is invited to participate daily (Sanders, 2023). By allowing consumers to take part in this practice and observe the milking process, they may become better informed about the production practices that go into producing a gallon of milk or a pint of ice cream, strengthening the connection between Alabama's farmers and consumers.

In today's world, it is rare that an activity is engaging and educational is also fun and enjoyed by the entire family. Agritourism creates the unique opportunity for activities like this to exist. By combining education with family-friendly fun, agritourism allows for a strong relationship between farmers and consumers to be created. Penton Farms of Verbena, Alabama has created an experience that appeals to the entire family. On their farm, visitors may purchase pumpkins, mums,

and all other “necessary” fall decorative items. In addition, visitors may also participate in wagon rides, corn pits, cow trains, a farm animal petting zoo, a corn maze, and combine slides, just to name a few. (Penton Farms, 2023). While these activities may just seem like a fun day at the pumpkin patch to many, Penton Farms is exposing children and their families to agriculture and educating them about the importance of this industry. Agritourism combines entertainment with education and seeks to promote the industry that feeds and clothes the world, in turn, strengthening the connection between Alabama’s farms and communities.

Agritourism is a unique industry that combines the “best of both worlds”. Consumers are able to experience agriculture like never before, becoming even more informed and educated on modern agricultural practices. On the other side of the same “coin”, farmers and ranchers are able to not only tell the true story of agriculture, but also explore new markets in which they may sell their products. Agritourism creates a symbiotic relationship that seeks to promote agriculture and further connect Alabama’s farms and communities.