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## **DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST PRODUCT ON THE FARMS – CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract.** In marketing terms, rural tourism becomes significantly more important segment of the Serbian tourist offer. This kind of tourism has been developing in Vojvodina even on farms, as a specific form of traditional agricultural holding. This paper deals with the farms in the region of Bečej, development of farming tourism up to now, as well as the analysis of the standpoint of farmers, both those with and without experience in doing profitable business this way. Questionnaire was used as an instrument in this research and the results collected are aimed at the development of selective tourist offer with the specific packages to be offered, and the development on a viable tourism foundation taken into consideration.

**Key words:** farms, tourist product, selective tourism, Bečej

### **Introduction**

Farming tourism is a term that denotes tourist offer on farms in Vojvodina as a specific pattern of traditional agricultural holding that creates a characteristic segment of rural tourism. Specific quality of farming tourism is related to the character of a farm itself, which is at most characterized by the traditional way of life, earning and living by preserving cultural, customary and folklore elements of its inhabitants (Ćurčić & Bjeljac, 2008). Farming tourism is spatially connected to the Panonia Plain and Vojvodina where the tradition of farming life has been present for centuries and is very well preserved in certain parts, with a clear tendency of revive old and build new farms for tourist-purposes (Ćurčić & Bukvić, 2005).

Farming tourism, which is functionally linked to the distinctive residential and commercial units of the Pannonian region, is distinguished in a rural tourist offer of Serbia. Its characteristic is based on accommodation in a preserved historical-ambient environment where visitors encounter the way of life that evokes the

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spirit of the past. The layout, equipment, atmosphere and some everyday activities bring the experience of life in the old, traditional isolated farm in Vojvodina, which is authentic in rural offer of Serbia. As the elements of tradition are more represented therefore it is tourist offer more valuable and more powerful effect in attracting tourists.

Farms have been experiencing revitalization recently by being put in the new context of tourism, ecology and sustainable development and as the professor Branka Lazić (2006) states in a book entitled "My Farm": "Revitalization of farms is evident and it is of a huge importance to Vojvodina. Those farms are architectural, cultural and historic part of the Panonia Plain, our roots and our unexploited wealth".

The facts that could be gathered indicate that construction of farms began in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the majority of them were built by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not many of them survived, especially with their original function<sup>2</sup>. Tourist activating of farms in Vojvodina is one of the ways to revive them and this topic has been approached seriously in recent years.

Special Master Plans were prepared for some parts of Vojvodina covering tourism and suggesting specific measures and programs to activate the existing facilities (farms) or build and improve specific tourist complexes, environmentally viable, i.e. ethno village, sports complexes, improving coastal areas etc. The Master Plan for the Upper Podunavlje tourist area was prepared for Bačka region and it foresees revitalization of farms in Sombor municipality (project named Farms to the north of Bačka) that provides a concrete program of staying on farms along with complementary contexts suitable for half-day and whole-day tours (Scientific-Research Center, 2007; Stojanović & Manić, 2009).

Activating farms in tourist purposes would influence rising of the local community's income, i.e. improvement of the quality of life, but certain preconditions should be fulfilled, i.e. increase approachability, provide basic public services (Spalević, 2009), communal infrastructure, as well as tourist education for inhabitants.

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of time, the farms in the region between the Danube and the Tisa have stayed in best shape, in the area from Titel, Novi Sad and Bačka Palanka to the north up to Sombor and Subotica. The majority of those farms were built during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even though their appearance and purpose have altered a lot, they have generally preserved the important characteristics of specific housing: old tools, dishes, folk costumes, and some customs (Dragičević, 2007).

### **Farms and potential to farming tourism in Bečej municipality**

Bečej Municipality, situated in the far east of Bačka at the right bank of the Tisa River, is very well connected to other parts of Vojvodina as far as traffic is concerned. According to the 2002 Municipal census, there are 40,987 inhabitants, living in 6 settlements, Bečej, Bačko Gradište, Bačko Petrovo Selo, Radičević, Mileševo (Drljan), and Poljanice. The inhabitants' structure is multinational and the majority comprises Hungarians (49%) and Serbs (41%) (<http://www.becej.rs>).

Farmlands comprise 42,538 hectares or 87.4% of the total municipality's area of 48,653 hectares, while all other areas cover 6,115 hectares or 12.6%. Furthermore, a high percentage of the most fertile land types are within farmlands – black soil and meadow-black soil (83% of total) (<http://www.becej.rs>). When fertility of the soil is taken into consideration, agrarian production has a long tradition and high results in crops. Specific housing premises were developed at the territory of Bečej municipality thanks to favorable circumstances for the development of farming-production, i.e. farms that nowadays could be successfully utilized for farmland tourism development, along with their original function.

Bečej has emerged on the bank of the Tisa River, the former military frontier between Austria and Turkey in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The initial smaller settlements were repeatedly destroyed by the Turkish army, rebels Rakoci Ferenc, and then from the plague in 1707. Since the 1751 Bečej progresses and grows and becomes a seat of Potiski crown district in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Construction of the farms appears around the 1795, after the measurement of districts and share of land to farmers, where for practical reasons of saving time on travel from village to field, was built a small hut of charge and roofs of reeds and straw. Eventually these objects are extended, altered and added the stables, pigsties, sheds and the family lived on them. The modest building in which the landowner with drew himself from the sun, rain, or to rest has become a complex of buildings for permanent residence, surrounded by fields and pasture owners. Farmers who took land from the village to the good rides over an hour to travel were more appropriate to raise the farm in the field and settled there.

During the golden age of farms, from 1890 to 1910, there were 638 farms registered in the area around Bečej. Correlation between farm's density and territory surface was very good at that time and it was 55 cadastre acres of

farmlands per farm. At that time there were 8 windmills in Bečej, 7 watermills and 4 inn restaurants (čarda) at main travel routes (Gavrić, 1994).

Nowadays, the number of farms in Bečej municipality is significantly lower than in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This resulted by altering the ways of working on farms (tractors and other mechanization), fragmenting farmlands, migration of population to towns and employment in factories, as well as by the national policy measures implemented in 1946 through confiscating of farms and in land consolidation during 1970s.

According to the Agrarian Cooperative in Bečej, 735 farms were demolished in land consolidation and today there are 250 of them. The Agrarian Cooperative in Bečej also provides the fact that today there are 50 "alive" farms with permanently inhabited population (The Agrarian Cooperative Bečej – internal data) (Figure 1).

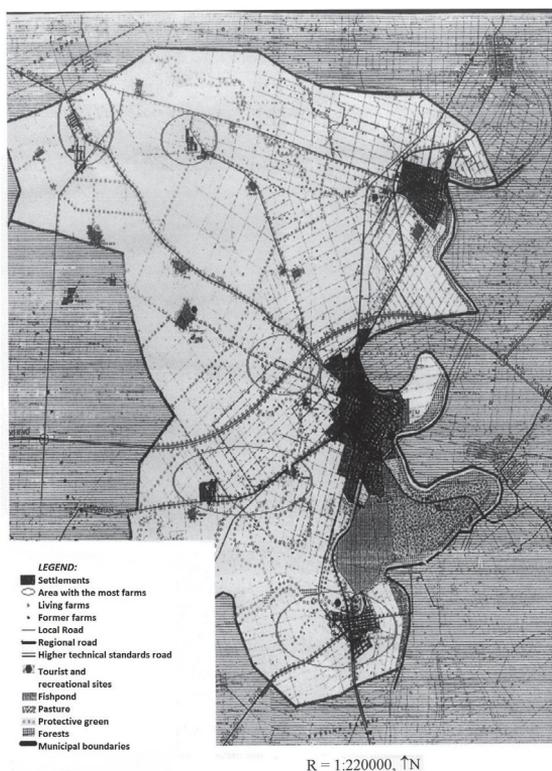


Figure 1. Distribution of farms in the municipality of Bečej (Planning Institute of Vojvodina, 1982)

Permanently inhabited farms in Bečej municipality are in a relatively good condition as far as housing premises and economic buildings are concerned. What decreases the value of these farms is the fact that electric current is not provided, while water is supplied from wells and this could present an obstacle in accommodating tourists. On the other hand, there are some farms that are relatively new buildings in excellent condition (constructed with qualitative material, there is electric current, the latest mechanization for agriculture, nicely tidied up stales with highbred horses, etc.) and are completely set to receive tourists, but does not exude the atmosphere of the old and authentic life which reduces their tourist value, and therefore can not be part of this offer of selective forms of tourism (Čurčić, Pavlović & Stanojlović, 2010).

### **Research of tourist offer on the Bečej farms**

#### *Aims of the Research*

Three main tasks of this research are to ascertain:

- How well are farmers acquainted with the Vojvodinian farmland tourism and how would they evaluate the attractiveness of farms around Bečej,
- What are the ways to be included in the tourist offer and
- What do they expect their household would get by taking part in farmland tourism?

This research aims to determine whether there were tourist visits on the Bečej farms so far, what kind of experience did the farmers gather out of the work in tourism, as well as what is their future orientation and willingness to participate in an organized way in the tourist offer and how to make that offer better and thus acceptable by the standards of the market.

#### *Instruments and Procedures of the Research*

A questionnaire was used as an instrument in this research and was prepared by the authors of the paper. The questionnaire consists of a list of questions divided into 4 parts. The first part studies the demographic structure of a sample (7 questions). The second part of the questionnaire relates to general questions about farms, farmland tourism and identifying the possibility of including the farms of Bečej into tourist offer (4 questions). The third part of the questionnaire is for farmers who had no experience in providing tourist services and it explores standpoints, thoughts and orientation of farmers when accepting

and accommodating tourists on their farms (7 questions). The fourth part of the questionnaire is aimed at experienced farm holders, those who gained knowledge in accepting guests and the questions here are similar to those of the third group but slightly modified.

This questionnaire surveyed 25 persons, i.e. inhabitants of farms in Bečej municipality, by randomly selecting through direct polling, and with the indirect questioning method (respondents filling out the questionnaires by themselves without an interviewer being present).

### *Size and Structure of a Sample*

The first part of this questionnaire covers the respondents' general characteristics. On the basis of them the following information could be gathered: farmer's gender and age group structure; whether he has been living on farm all of his life or just visits it occasionally while living in town; the size of his family; their education; income sources; and their opinions on their own living standard.

The research included 25 persons, either permanently or temporarily inhabited on farms. According to the gender structure, men made 60% of the respondents and women 40%. Gender relation among the surveyed persons is uneven because the questionnaire was conducted in the fields (on farms) and there are fairly large numbers of men living there permanently, while some of them are there occasionally during agricultural works and that is why they are there more often.

The average age of people living on farms in Bečej municipality is 50 years. The youngest person questioned was 23 years old and the oldest was of 75.

This research resulted in establishing how long those people had been living on farms, i.e. what were the reasons of inhabiting farms. The respondents could be divided into the following groups according to their answers:

- Those who've been living on farms permanently (all their lives) (44%),
- Respondents who live in town (village) but are on farm every day because of farming works (24%),
- Respondents who used to live on farms (but farms were demolished) and today, after the new ones were built, live on farms again (20%),

- There are young married couples that come to live and work on farms because of the bad financial situation (produce food for themselves and are active in agriculture) (12%).

By studying the size of a family on the farms around Bečej, it is clear that four-member families are in majority, followed by families with more than 5 members, then 2 member families, 5 and 3 member families and in the end, and in minority, are those farms where only 1 person lives and works (usually the oldest inhabitants of farms whose families have moved to towns or other members of their families have passed away).

Further survey established the respondents' level of education. The results affirm that the farmers' education level is very satisfactory (48% of them graduated from high school or university), in relation to well-established opinion that farmers were uneducated persons. Of all the respondents, the majority of them completed primary school (48%), and the least number of farmers were without schooling (4%) (Figure 2).

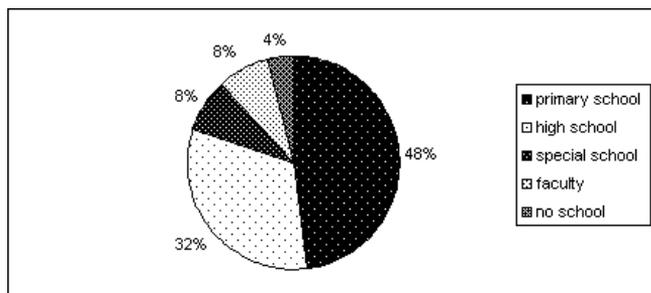


Figure 2. Education level of respondents

The main source of income is farming (88% of them) for the majority of respondents. A number of those who work in public service have decreased (8% of respondents), and the number of farmers who are employed in private entrepreneurship is even lower (4%), while nobody is taking part in some other activities.

When studying the living standard level, it was established that 68% of respondents considered they had the average living standard, 28% of them thought it was low, and only 4% of respondents considered it high.

## Results of the research

*The second part* the questionnaire consists of 4 questions relating to the familiarity with the concept of farmland tourism, knowledge about it, noticing the existing potentials for development as well as suggestions for possible products of farmland tourism in Bečej municipality.

Out of the total number of respondents, 68% have heard for the notion of farmland tourism and that is an extremely positive fact because thus there is a possibility that farmers want to get interested even more for this aspect of tourism and develop it successfully through improving knowledge and standards on their farms (Figure 3). Revitalization of farms through tourism could have numerous positive effects, not only at households – farm owners, but also at global development of rural areas where farms are situated: economic, demographic, ecologic, cultural, infrastructural, communal, integrative effects (Marić, 2001).

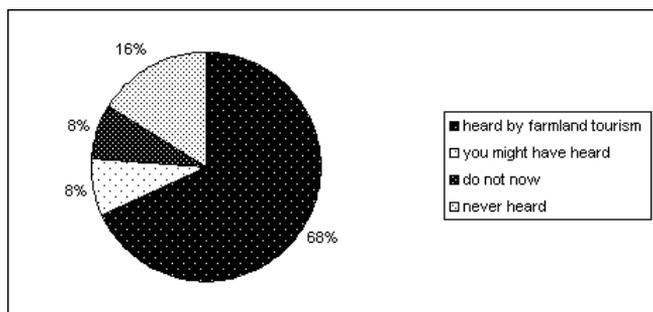


Figure 3. Informed respondents about farmland tourism

This questionnaire provided the respondents with the possibility to express their own thoughts on the issue of farmland tourism. Getting answers this way is good to us because it “opens the road” in getting to know the creative power of respondents and their experiences in this kind of tourism. Very interesting answers were gathered and they could be used in scheduling the tourist offer of Bečej farms and the most relevant answers are listed below. Majority of respondents is of the opinion that farmland tourism is of such type that it encompasses:

- “Receiving guests arriving to the farm from town, where they could get good food, peace, quietness and nice surroundings.”

#### Development of tourist product on the farms – case study

- “It would be very good to develop this kind of tourism because it provides to guests, along with adequate program, peace, quietness, spending time in unpolluted surroundings, but a lot of funding is required.”
- “Visiting farms (townspeople who visit farms want to get acquainted with them a bit more).”
- “Life within free space, twittering of birds, wholesome food.”
- “Pleasant surroundings, complete relaxation in nature, good nutrition – good old specialties, there is no track of time, the best and healthiest way of vacation, developing love towards domestic animals.”

The answers listed above indicate that the respondents did their best to go straight to the right point of the issue so that the basic elements of tourist offer could be extracted in different descriptions in the way the people who live and work on these farms had perceived it and are willing to participate in new ways of earning.

Figure 4 presents the opinions of farm inhabitants on the existence of potentials for the development of tourism where they are in high percentage (76%) aware of the potential they possess on farms or in the surrounding area and of the possibility to use it for a new form of tourism.

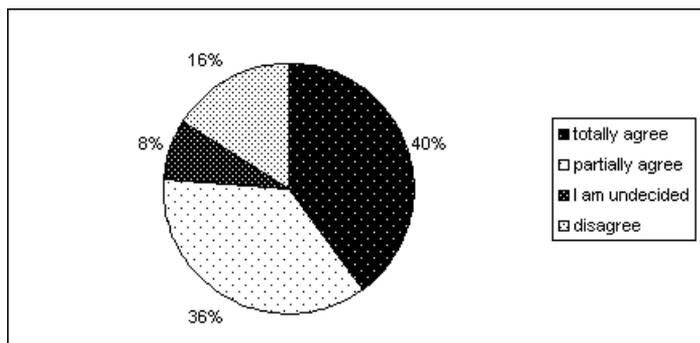


Figure 4. Do farms in Bečej municipality have a potential for the development of tourism?

This research-segment was conducted in order to establish farmers' ideas on perception on what would be the most interesting to tourists on farms. Majority of respondents is of the opinion that life on the farm would be the most interesting aspect because of the indigenously and traditional ways of life and

work. The respondents who presented their personal views on this matter follow them. They consider that tourists should be attracted in the following ways:

- Prepare the program for town-children with the aim to get acquainted with domestic animals,
- Organize a weekend-stay on the farm with home cooking and taking part in works,
- Organize hackney-courage ride from the farm to the river of Tisa and the river of Mrtva Tisa,
- Provide accommodation for hunters and driving to hunting-grounds,
- Demonstrate horse-breeding on the farm,
- Open the school of horse riding, etc.

The answers confirmed that the tourist product of farm and the rural area in general, must contain the components of authenticity i.e., ecological, health-related, sporting recreation programs and cultural components, in accordance with the basic principles (Dragičević, 2007).

*Third part* of the questionnaire relates to farm holders without the experience in farmland tourism offer. From the very beginning of analyzing, it was clear that the number of farm holders without experience (21 person or 84%) is in a majority in relation to the number of those with it (4 persons or 16%).

It is clear from the analysis that 57% of farm holders without experience has been thinking about accommodating tourists on their farms, while the number of those who have never thought of that amounts to 29%, i.e., double less. The least number of respondents (14%) faces a dilemma, saying they might thought about that (Figure 5). The media has significantly influenced the high percentage of farm holders who wanted to accommodate tourists and are more active in making farmland tourism popular, and highlighting rural tourism as one of the most important models in the Strategy of Tourism in Serbia from 2005 to 2015. It has also influenced the involvement of the state in the application of wider spectrum of stimulating measures through favorable granting to farm holds or providing unreimbursable funds to invest in farms with an important factor of providing free training for this type of tourism.

The results that relate to arranging farms for tourist-accommodation are very interesting (adapting and renovating facilities along with necessary investments). The analysis of this segment is a very good indicator that the respondents were ready to adopt their households in order to improve tourism (66%) (Figure 6). A farm settled for tourism purposes should preserve its original look but at the same time fulfill all requests set by the criterion of categorization (Stankov, 2007). A significant number would agree to education related to the

development of farmland tourism (81%), while there is a far less number of farmers who were not ready for this type of education (14%) and of those who were not sure (5%). That could be justified by the fact that farmers are of older population, have no financial means and are not fit for working in tourism.

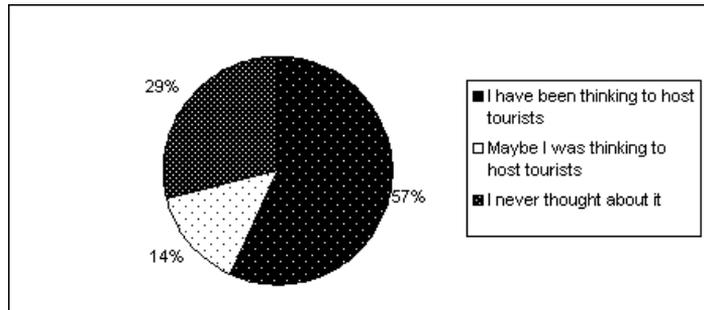


Figure 5. Have you ever thought of providing accommodation to tourists on your farm?

Majority of respondents presented personal plans as far as providing services to guests, along with a night's accommodation and meals, and the ways to do it (Figure 7). They would inform the tourists about the life on farms, would take them to see domestic animals, involve them into daily works, organize hackney-carriage rides, and some would even drive visitors up to Fantast (castle-hotel) or other neighbouring farms, would teach them to ride horses etc. (38%). Farmers are also willing to get their guests acquainted with and involve them into different local manifestations that are connected to the occasional manifestations about life, work and culture of farmers and are of specific quality when the tradition of life on farm is concerned (28%).

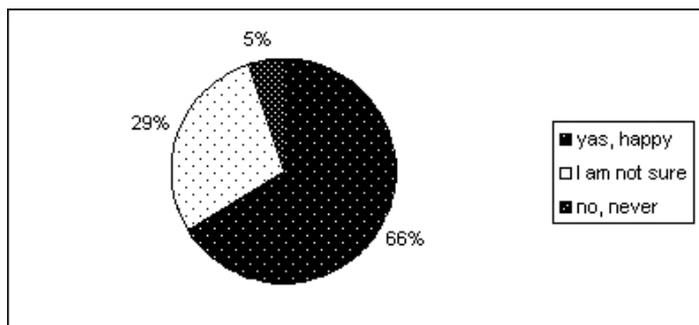


Figure 6. Would you organize your farm to accommodate tourists?

The expectations the farmers have from the farmland tourism (i.e., the benefit in developing this kind of tourism in the municipality) are for a huge number of them a good chance to meet and spend time with people, and that reflects their loneliness and the need to communicate (48%). A significant number of them saw a financial benefit in developing farms in tourist purposes (38%) and a new way of earning for themselves and their families that would improve and raise the living standard on farms (Figure 8).

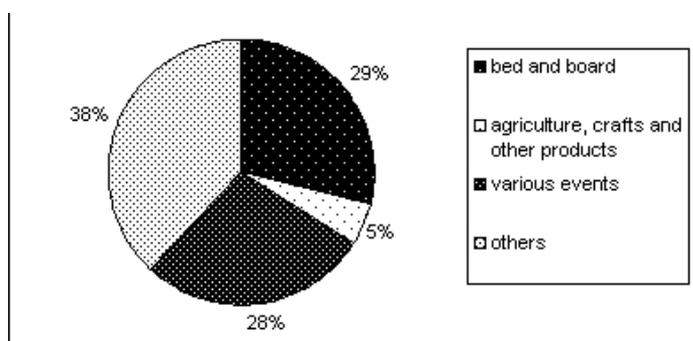


Figure 7. What would you offer to guests to make their visit more comfortable?

This part of the survey was conducted in order to find out what kind of tourists farmers would like to accommodate on their farms. A number of respondents who did take into account basic characteristics of tourists but only were interested in profit are very low (5%) and it could be concluded that with other respondents, representing a group of a larger number, some other motives are more important (Figure 9). The following is important for our further analysis: the majority of respondents chose to provide accommodation to families as target groups (52%); they are followed by respondents who decided to accommodate the youth (29%), and in the end are those who decided to accommodate pensioners – “tourism of the third age” (14%). The opinions of respondents should be taken into account when creating the tourist product, and a suitable program should be suggested to each category of tourists in particular, with the accent on the family as primary target group.

The respondents without experience in accommodating tourists generally did not try to promote their farms. In an informal conversations with those respondents we learned that the reasons were the following: a big majority of them considers that farms they had were not attractive enough for strong promotion and they would need a lot of funds to accommodate guests and raise the comfort of accommodation and that is considered as favorable at the market.

## Development of tourist product on the farms – case study

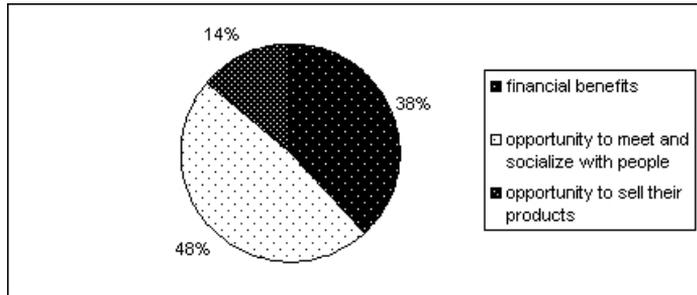


Figure 8. What are the benefits the respondents see in the farmland tourism?

Only a few attempted to introduce their farms. They did that in the following way: majority of them presented the farm to their friends, relatives, who were their guests, while the number of those who did it through media is irrelevant.

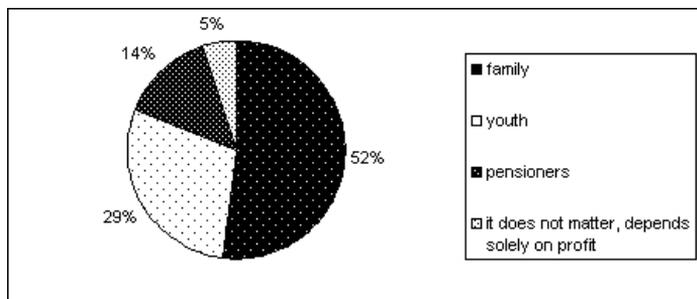


Figure 9. Who would you like to accommodate on your farm?

*Forth Part* of the questionnaire was prepared for the farm owners with the experience in accommodating guests, but there was a very few of them who chose this part of the poll (4 persons, i.e. 16%). The conclusion emerges that there are not many farmers in Bečej municipality who received tourists on their properties. It is a very important fact that the majority of people who were guests on those farms were not tourists in classical sense (they did not stay for a night), but were more visitors in a one-day or shorter stay on farm. Since the number of respondents in this part is very low the results would not be presented in percentages but in a descriptive way.

With the experienced respondents, in the majority are those farmers who received guests on their farms many times, and the number of those who accommodated them once is irrelevant. These respondents are also willing to

attend training courses connected to tourism development and all that with the aim to achieve the best economic improvement of farms.

Up to now, the farmers were offering accommodation and good domestic food, comfortable retreat with stories about old farming customs, demonstration of works and life on farms today, driving by hackney-carriage or riding horses, and all that in a sociable atmosphere and friendly hospitality.

It was established that the respondents who did receive tourists on farms had no bigger financial benefit out of that. The only benefit was a chance to meet people and to sell i.e., better present their farming products (cheese, eggs, fruit brandy, food provisions for winter, etc.) or realize longer business cooperation with some of them.

There are a divided number of respondents whose hospitality was the same to all guests and those who were not sure. It came to our knowledge in informal conversations that the reason for the equivalent kind of hospitality towards all guests (visitors) was isolation and thus the loneliness of farmers who were happy to see anyone who came by. Furthermore, we get to know that the respondents who were not sure about their hospitality to all evenhandedly provide the following reasons for that: not all the guests were sociable and well-intended so the farmers had treated them the same. Needless to say, farmers took a positive attitude towards people with good intentions.

Divergent answers were received in responding to the open type questions when asked to present their opinions on what was lacking in the offer on Bečej farms. However, all respondents agreed that every activity, and especially tourism, should have a strong financial support in order to supplement the framework and improve living conditions on farms (to adapt housing and economic buildings on farms, improve approach roads, set up lacking infrastructure) so that everything would be more attractive. In addition to this, they consider it would be helpful to bring into play a strong tourist organization in developing tourism in the municipality of Bečej that would along with arranging and equipping farms deal with placing advertisements and offers for accepting tourists through tourist agencies.

The respondents were prepared to cooperate as well as precise and exhaustive in their answers thus providing a useful material for further researches and framing the development of farmland tourism in the municipality of Bečej.

## Conclusion

Rural tourism presents a suitable form for holidays, leisure activities, entertainment, recreation and education for all those at the market willing to experience tourism on other basis than classic hotel management. Rural and farmland tourism as well provide a wide range of activities for customers of different age who are active, motive-oriented groups of customers gathered under the common denominator – tourism at viable foundations. Therefore including farms into the tourist offer opens the road to economic improvement of rural households along with preserving and keeping the authentic way of life and work alive.

Tourism on the farms surrounding Bečej is in its initial phase i.e., in the phase of indicating and getting acquainted with this form of economy. The local population is interested in this and the first initial experiences could be discerned, a potential in accommodating and attractive resources is present and was registered. What needs to be done is to come up with qualitative tourist programs, sources for additional infrastructure-investments, to put it on market with the assistance of promotional actions and strong support by the Municipality's Tourist organization. Thus, the farmland tourism could have multiple positive effects both for farmers and the local environment where the accent would be put on preserving and promoting the autochthonous economic-historian and cultural heritage.

Tourist products that would be established and have been recognized by farmers themselves would include the offer based on healthy way of living: retreat, relaxation and recreation in a natural surroundings and nutrition that would provide biologically healthy and groceries with no chemical no treatment. Heterogeneousness of the “package” offered would range from passive vacation i.e., walking to more or less active vacation that would include various works on farms, sports contexts, and cultural animation. The “packages” offered would also be adjusted to different age groups of guests and to individual or smaller group visits. The offer should differ and be made for different seasons (summer and winter activities). Successful implementation of the program by farmers requires professional training along with application of all standards that farmland tourism trade requires.

The above mentioned activities could be implemented on the farms of Bečej municipality, constantly taking care that everything that is local, original, traditional, and authentic is preserved, undisrupted by the mixing and influence of tourists (altering the well-established way of life, initiating unauthentic

customs to local tradition, diferente pressures on local community), and that the natural surroundings was preserved but not devastated thus bringing the original experience of farmland's natural environment into jeopardy. This is why it could be expected that this type of tourism is not to acquire the characteristics of a massive one, but would preserve the position of selective tourism that would not provide the farm holders with high economic profitability but would remain additional form of doing profitable business along with the developed farming-production.

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## Development of tourist product on the farms – case study

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