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### **Expanding Ecotourism to Agritourism: A Dominican Republic Case Study**

#### **Abstract**

Constanza, a municipality in the Dominican Republic's Vega province, has the Caribbean's highest elevation. The region boasts national parks, areas of environmental significance, cultural attractions, and a vibrant agricultural economy. The Constanza Ecotourism Cluster recognized the region's agritourism potential and seeks to expand it, increasing tourism numbers and engagement and providing economic diversity for the agricultural sector. A vibrant tourism industry in Constanza will benefit all businesses in the region and help national and international guests understand the importance and value of Constanza's agricultural contributions. This paper reports the results of two Farmer-To-Farmer volunteer assignments which explored options for expanding Constanza's agritourism and is helping build capacity. Results showed that many agritourism opportunities already exist in Constanza, although there is a general lack of awareness of agritourism among businesses and visitors. Agritourism opportunities can be integrated into ecotourism and tourism initiatives through continued marketing and development.

**Keywords:** agritourism, ecotourism, Constanza, Dominican Republic

**Abbreviations:** Constanza Ecotourism Cluster (CEC), Farmer-To-Farmer (F2F), United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

## **Introduction**

Constanza is known as the Enchanted Valley and is recognized among Dominican Republic residents for the cooler climate, national parks, and ecotourism opportunities (Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 2022). It sits at the highest elevation in the Caribbean, with five river basins, and is ideal for agricultural production (Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 2022; Meyer, 2019; Morales et al, 2005). The Constanza Ecotourism Cluster (CEC), a voluntary organization developed over 20 years ago with 48 member businesses, wants to connect tourists to agriculture by adding agritourism along with the existing ecotourism opportunities (N. Duran, personal communication, September 2, 2024). Constanza offers a grand symbiosis of agriculture, the environment, and culture; tourism can augment each of these and improve the region's economic viability.

Agriculture comprises 80% of the economic revenue and is critical to the municipality's success (Dominican Today, 2023; N. Duran, personal communication, September 2, 2024). Constanza's agricultural production is advanced with import and export products (Morales et al., 2005). It produces numerous fruits, vegetables, and horticultural products, including 42 fruits and vegetables grown year-round (Dominican Today, 2023; N. Duran, personal communication, September 2, 2024). The Dominican Republic is a food-producing country, and the Constanza Valley is an important contributor to the country's food security and economy (Meyer, 2019).

Moreover, agritourism, along with developing a Constanza brand, could increase demand for the region's agricultural products, further securing its agricultural status and economic viability. Previous research shows the benefits that ecotourism clusters have in Latin America (Constanzo, 2015) and that agritourism can help agricultural communities mitigate economic risk (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2016; Yusuf and Wulandari, 2023; Zvavahera and Chigora, 2023).

The Harvest Festival of Constanza had its third installation in 2024 and promotes the agricultural harvest and connection to the local fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Farmer and producer participation as exhibitors is minimal; however, the festival recognizes and

celebrates agriculture throughout the multi-day event. The festival committee dedicated the October 2024 festival to agritourism. One of the festival dedication goals was for the festival to serve as a catalyst for agritourism in Constanza, while recognizing that strengthening agritourism in Constanza is a multi-year process (N. Duran and V. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2024). This paper expands on how two volunteers worked with the CEC to first build capacity around agritourism, and second expand the sector through marketing initiatives.

### **Capacity building**

The Partners of the Americas Farmer-To-Farmer (F2F) program began in 1991 and sends volunteers with specialized skills to over 30 countries, including the Dominican Republic (Partners of the Americas, n.d.). The Constanza Ecotourism Cluster previously worked with a F2F volunteer, and the festival was a result of their efforts (R. Aracena, personal communication, September 2, 2024). The authors volunteered with Constanza in July 2023 and September 2024, with each successive volunteer assignment building upon the previous efforts.

The July 2023 F2F volunteer visit to Constanza with the CEC was primarily to assess their needs to host a successful festival with more involvement from the agricultural producers. The CEC stakeholders' goal is to improve the technical capacity of local food producers, processors, distributors and others in the local food value-chain, including through continuing education at the festival for these audiences. As such, they were interested in evaluating potential technical experts to deliver a tailored educational program during the festival to address gaps in their current system of production and marketing.

This assignment consisted mainly of stakeholder meetings and discussions to gain a better understanding of what the current agricultural and ecological assets are in the Constanza and Hermanas Mirabal region and to determine the barriers and challenges to community eco- and agritourism development.

In Constanza, listening sessions and discussions were held with the CEC, selected entrepreneurs and local processors provided tours of their operations for the F2F

volunteer, as well as a general tour of the Constanza agricultural areas. For each visit, we discussed observations, potential gaps and initial recommendations with CEC Representative, Vienchy Rodriguez.

To this end, the F2F volunteer recommended the following as priority areas to be addressed through future educational programs for the region:

- Sustainable agricultural production with an emphasis on environmental stewardship (encouraging integrated pest management to reduce chemical use and non-point source pollution, and water quality management through improved irrigation methods, such as drip irrigation, and cover crop use).
- Profitability and value-chain efficiencies through forward contracting and understanding buyer requirements; production and supply chain food safety protocols.
- Promoting eco- and agritourism activities that deliberately integrate the region's agriculture, ecology, culture, gastronomy, biodiversity and geography.

The F2F advisors also provided specific recommendations for individual businesses which they had visited on the tours. These recommendations could be adopted by other similar entrepreneurship initiatives in the agritourism region.

For a strawberry agritourism venture (Strawberry Experience), entrepreneurs should consider costs, pricing and profitability analysis; invest in value-added products to encourage year-round sales; enhance the 'visitor experience' with effective safety and educational signage; and improve reservation logistics to enhance customer experience and business efficiencies.

Succulents Suppliers, another business the F2F advisors visited, offers a unique community resource that could be scaled up to a business model of a community conservatory or succulent museum to capitalize on this being the largest collection of succulents in the Caribbean and the invaluable expertise of its owner. Additionally, the business model at the current location can be maintained for more intimate, tailored events as part of the community eco- and agritourism product offerings.

More specifically, the following recommendations from the July 2023 volunteer assignment for technical capacity building will inform future educational training, starting with educational events at the Constanza Local Foods Festival.

- Topics to include: integrated pest management to reduce chemical use and non-point source pollution; water quality management through improved irrigation methods, such as drip irrigation, and cover crop use; profitability and value-chain efficiencies through forward contracting and understanding buyer requirements; production and supply chain food safety protocols; developing and promoting eco- and agritourism activities that deliberately integrates the region's agriculture, ecology, culture, gastronomy, and biodiversity and geography.
- For individual businesses such as the Strawberry Experience, entrepreneurs should be trained to evaluate costs, pricing and profitability analysis; invest in value-added products to encourage year-round sales; enhance the 'visitor experience' with effective safety and educational signage; and improve reservation logistics to enhance customer experience and business efficiencies.
- Specifically, for the Succulents Suppliers business, provide training on how this unique community resource can be scaled up to a business model of a community conservatory or succulent museum to capitalize on this being the largest collection of succulents in the Caribbean and its owners experience.

## **Expanding agritourism**

The two-week volunteer assignment in September 2024 was for a marketing and digital communications expert to work with the Constanza Ecotourism Cluster to expand agritourism opportunities by creating an overall marketing plan and assisting with festival marketing. The project aligns with the Partners of the Americas goal to help rural producers expand income and products.

First, the volunteer conducted an audit through interviews with the CEC leaders. The Harvest Festival is already successful with 40,000 attendees annually (V. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2024), billboards throughout Constanza, a strong digital presence, and commitments from many local businesses to participate. As hotels are fully booked during the festival, the organizing committee believes that attendees are from throughout the Dominican Republic (V. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2024), and not solely from among Constanza's 100,000 residents (Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, 2022). There are steps the CEC can take to improve agricultural involvement at the Harvest Festival. While digital marketing

and communications for the Harvest Festival was a primary focus for the September 2024 F2F volunteer assignment, the marketing and communications for the Harvest Festival are strong, with 95% of vendor space sold one month prior to the event (V. Rodriguez, personal communication, September 10, 2024).

This volunteer assignment placed greater emphasis on expanding agritourism operations and marketing the sector. There are already examples of agritourism in Constanza, and the sector can build upon these operations and continue expanding. Many of the businesses in Constanza were unclear on the definition of agritourism and an awareness campaign that promotes the definition should be one of the CEC's first goals. The Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism (2022) and Constanza define agritourism in the ecotourism guide:

*Agritourism is an activity that provides the opportunity to merge agriculture with tourism, taking advantage of the crops to organize authentic excursions, offering healthy and enriching entertainment for all ages. Examples in Constanza include visits to fruit farms, flowers, vegetables, and greenhouses.*

Agritourism experiences are available through the local restaurants and hotels as farm-to-table meals rely on products grown in Constanza, and in some cases, at the location where a guest is enjoying a meal. The volunteer identified six such agritourism businesses in Constanza during the assignment. Additionally, many of Constanza's businesses have agritourism aspects, although they are not necessarily aware of the connection or advertising them as such. For example, one restaurant also owns a farm and harvests products at the farm for the restaurant (Y. Crus, personal communication, September 10, 2024), while a hotel operates a zero-kilometer restaurant, raising meat, vegetables, and fruits on the grounds (D. Matias, personal communication, September 2, 2024). Many businesses with agritourism are smaller or primarily based in another sector, such as hotels and restaurants. This is partially because the farmers are focusing on producing crops, although the goal is for agricultural producers to understand that agritourism is an economically viable option (N. Duran, personal communication, September 2, 2024).

## **Creating a sustainable marketing plan**

The F2F volunteer interviewed 23 of the 48 CEC members and business owners during the two-week September 2024 volunteer assignment, and this informed the marketing plan development to ensure it is sustainable and useful for Constanza. Interviewees included hotels, restaurants, a bakery, the succulent store and café, and a safari guide. Interview questions were developed in collaboration with the F2F staff, who provided both F2F volunteers with existing data. The questions included information about their businesses, awareness of the agritourism definition, whether they were growing crops, where they purchase agricultural crops, opinion about a Constanza brand, involvement in the festival, and business challenges they were facing. Interviewees provided additional information and were asked follow-up questions. Similar to the July 2023 assignment, the CEC organized eco- and agritourism experiences at four locations, in collaboration with the Dominican Republic Ministry of Tourism, for Dominican social media influencers and the F2F volunteer.

The following themes and goals emerged during interviews with CEC members:

1. Increase agritourism awareness
2. Increase weekday tourism and group travel
3. Develop a Constanza brand
4. Increase guest activities and experiences
5. Promote and increase tourism engagement (tourist length of stay and engagement with local businesses)
6. Assist with workforce development and training

While increasing tourism and building Constanza as an agritourism destination are goals, this must be done incrementally, as the interviewees noted specific concerns. First, they want to ensure tourism growth is progressive and does not negatively impact Constanza. They do not want to sacrifice quality and again reference incremental growth. Finally, as agritourism increases, tourists must respect which farms are open for visitors and which are not.

At the end of the volunteer period, the F2F volunteer presented findings to the digital producers from Constanza, a group of communications experts in the region that work

with ecotourism businesses. The volunteer had a separate presentation to the CEC members. The materials included:

1. An agritourism marketing plan for Constanza. The plan includes resources, such as a draft crop map that could help agritourism operations and supporters maximize the use and marketing of the many crops grown in Constanza, and sample social media posts for expanding knowledge and awareness of agritourism.
2. A presentation and agritourism training for the nine digital producers and media with resources related to social media marketing for all the CEC businesses.
3. A presentation for the CEC business owners with an overview of the findings, and the short, medium, and long-term goals.

The agritourism marketing plan includes six short-term goals, 12 medium-term, and six long-term goals. These varied from an agritourism definition awareness campaign to building tourism infrastructure and creating an agritourism experience that is owned by a non-profit or other entity. Horticulture is a large part of Constanza's agriculture and there are also opportunities to partner with producers and create horticultural experiences at hotels and other locations. The marketing plan includes nine future recommendations for moving to the next level, recognizing that strengthening agritourism in Constanza is a multi-year process.

## **Discussion**

Constanza's agricultural productivity is an asset to the Dominican Republic and significantly contributes to the country's food security. Agritourism can help improve awareness nationally and internationally of Constanza's contributions, while also improving the economic viability of the sector and helping benefit tourism and the region overall. The Constanza Ecotourism Cluster is committed to expanding agritourism, and we expect increased awareness about agritourism, including the definition and the types of businesses included in the definition. They are continuously making improvements and have built upon the ideas and suggestions of successive F2F volunteers. The 2024 festival included programming for farmers and agritourism marketing is expanding.



Therefore, we expect the number of agritourism businesses to increase, as many of the businesses interviewed in both volunteer assignments discussed adding agritourism elements or starting a new operation. All efforts will contribute to an increased digital presence and recognition of Constanza as an agritourism location. There is energy and momentum around creating a Constanza brand, which would increase name recognition for Constanza products including fruits, vegetables, value-added, and businesses, among others.

Developing Constanza's agritourism sector is in the early stages, and future development must include the farmers and producers, along with other initiatives to support their businesses. Furthermore, there are tourism sector needs that must be met before any of the tourism sectors can grow further. Many interviewees discussed workforce development training for service industry personnel. The CEC is already working with a national organization to access training and certifications, although progress is slow. We recommended creating their own and offering the training to other municipalities with tourism employees if the national training does not meet their needs. Other aspects of tourism infrastructure, including more tour operators, signage, and transportation, also need attention. Continued support from the Ministry of Tourism and others should help facilitate this.

While many of the recent goals and recommendations are related to communications and marketing, there are also organizational steps that will help develop Constanza as an agritourism region. Professional development for CEC members, including on communications and marketing topics was one recommendation from the second assignment, while creating a one-year agritourism incubator for new operations is another. Many agricultural businesses have offices in Constanza, and the conference space at local hotels is ideal for hosting meetings and increasing weekday tourism. Constanza is also home to a Japanese Colony, and the natural environment and their involvement could provide opportunities for forest bathing in the region.

The limited participation in agritourism from Constanza's agricultural sector is a constraint, and strengthening the agricultural industry, as outlined during the first

volunteer assignment could also improve future participation from this group. There are several recommendations to address this limitation and support agricultural production in the region, including, training in post-harvest handling and value-added production. Constanza's agricultural producers should have better access to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension professionals too. Finally, the CEC members are also volunteers and implementing the volunteer recommendations in addition to managing their own businesses. This could hinder progress unless more support is provided from organizations and agencies. Limitations for our case study include that the F2F volunteers did not interview the larger agricultural businesses in Constanza, and that efforts outlined in this paper were supported by USAID, with unknown support for future F2F volunteer assignments.

## **Conclusion**

The Caribbean is already a popular tourist destination, and establishing Constanza as an eco- and agritourism destination can improve economic viability for the region, show guests all the country offers in addition to beaches, and connect people back to agriculture and food production processes. Agritourism's other benefits include improving sustainable production practices and encouraging younger generations to remain involved with their family farm (Mahaliyanaarachchi, 2016; Yusuf and Wulandari, 2023; Zvavahera and Chigora, 2023). Additionally, Constanza's environmental and cultural opportunities provide guests with diverse opportunities, making the area even more appealing. Agritourism is expanding internationally, and this case study shows that interest in the sector and efforts to develop agritourism will continue, and ideally, improve agricultural regions like Constanza and the lives of its residents.

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