

Research Article

Cumulative Failure and Functional Conversion in Agritourism: A Case Study of Agrowisata Sodong, Semarang City

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Abstract. The agritourism literature is dominated by studies of successful destinations, while destinations that fail are seldom examined systematically, even though these hold the clearest evidence of the minimum conditions agritourism must meet in order to survive. This study aims to explain the process of functional conversion at Agrowisata Sodong in Semarang City, which ceased operating as an agritourism destination in 2023 after shifting into a water-park-based recreation area, and to formulate an early detection model usable by destinations still in operation. The approach is qualitative, applying Straussian Grounded Theory procedures to a single case. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three key informants — the site manager, an officer of the sub-district community empowerment institution, and a sub-coordinator of the Semarang City Tourism Office — complemented by observation and document tracing, then analysed with NVivo 14, producing 89 substantive notes. The findings show that the failure was caused neither by limitations of land potential nor by accessibility, but by the sequential collapse of five foundations: conservation of productive land, farmer empowerment, participatory governance, innovation of the offering, and social philosophy. The process was cumulative and mutually contagious, with no single decision identifiable as the cause. On this basis the study formulates the Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model, a diagnostic instrument that maps the five foundations across four stages of erosion and sets a warning threshold for managers of destinations still in operation.

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1. Introduction

Agritourism has long been positioned as an instrument for diversifying farm income and as a strategy for revitalising rural areas. A number of studies show that combining agricultural production with visitor services can add economic value for farm households, widen local employment opportunities, and slow rural depopulation (Bednářová et al., 2022) (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). In Indonesia, similar optimism is reflected in the growth of agritourism destinations across nearly all provinces over the past two decades, driven by tourism village policy and the strengthening of rural creative economies. That optimism, however, carries a bias that is rarely questioned. A bibliometric review (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024) shows that global agritourism research is concentrated on the economic dimension and on growing destinations, while destinations that have ceased operating are almost never made the object of study in their own right. A similar pattern appears in the map of Indonesian agritourism research (Prasetyanto et al., 2025). The literature therefore offers many explanations of success factors but very little on the sequence of events that precedes failure. Yet the deviant case functions as a boundary test: it reveals which conditions, once lost, bring the whole system to a halt.

That gap becomes a practical problem when a number of Indonesian agritourism destinations are known to have ceased operating or changed function over the past decade. One of them is Agrowisata Sodong in Semarang City, Central Java. The site was originally developed as an agriculture- and culture-based tourism area in a lowland zone, with lowland horticultural commodities as the basis of its attraction. Since 2023, agritourism activity at the site has stopped and the function of the area has shifted to family recreation based on water rides. Notably, that shift was not preceded by disaster, major legal dispute, or loss of market access. Its location remains strategic and its land remains available.

This raises a question that the available success-factor frameworks cannot answer: how can an agritourism destination with adequate potential gradually lose its agritourism identity without any single event identifiable as the cause? The study therefore concentrates on one case and poses two questions. First, how did the reversal of function from agritourism towards non-agricultural recreation unfold at Agrowisata Sodong? Second, what mechanism explains why that reversal could not be halted by the stakeholders who witnessed it?

The study poses a third, applied question: can that pattern of failure be formulated into an instrument usable by other destinations still in operation? This matters because the value of a failure case does not end with its documentation. So long as a failure pattern is merely narrated, it is difficult to use. Once translated into a checklist with clear warning thresholds, it becomes a working tool.

The study therefore has two objectives. First, to construct a field-data-based explanation of the process and mechanism of the functional conversion that occurred. Second, to formulate a diagnostic model that managers of still-active agritourism destinations can use to detect the erosion of their foundations before that erosion becomes visible in visitor numbers. The contribution offered is specific: it supplies one systematically documented failure case in the context of Indonesian urban agritourism, and it offers the Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model as a working instrument that can be retested on other cases. The article is organised as follows. The second section reviews the literature. The third sets out the method. The fourth presents the results, the formulation of the model, and the discussion. The fifth contains the conclusion and limitations.

2. Literature Review

Agritourism and the Limits of Its Definition

(Phillip et al., 2010) construct a typology of agritourism around three distinguishing criteria: the presence of a working farm, the nature of contact between visitors and farming activity, and the authenticity of the farming experience offered. On these criteria, an area with an agricultural setting that provides no genuine contact with the production process cannot be classified as agritourism in the strict sense. (Flanigan et al., 2014) extend this typology by incorporating the perspectives of providers and visitors together, and find that the two perceptions frequently fail to coincide.

This definitional boundary matters for research on failure. An area may remain busy with visitors while ceasing to be agritourism, once the working-farm element has disappeared. Agritourism failure is therefore not identical to commercial failure. The distinction is often blurred in destination management reports that use visitor numbers as their single indicator.

Sustainability as a Prerequisite, Not an Accessory

(Breiby et al., 2020) identify four dimensions of sustainable experience in tourism, covering nature, culture, insight, and activity. That framework positions sustainability as a quality perceived by visitors rather than merely a management target. In the agritourism context, (Cavalleri et al., 2022) show that rural livelihood diversification is sustainable only when development decisions involve direct community participation. (Ahrabous et al., 2025) add evidence from the Todgha Oasis in Morocco that the benefits of agritourism for wellbeing depend on the continued functioning of the underlying farming system.

The systematic review by (Ammirato et al., 2020) shows that studies of agritourism and sustainability tend to treat sustainability as an outcome measured at the end of a period rather than as a condition requiring continuous maintenance. (Marangon et al., 2023) add that multidimensional agricultural valuation often overlooks hidden costs that surface only later. Both observations are relevant here, because the failure examined proceeded precisely through costs that were invisible at the moment the decisions were taken. (Arenas et al., 2023) reinforce this with the finding that agritourism visitor preferences are generally studied

through attributes of the offering, so declines in the quality of the foundations are rarely detected through visitor surveys.

(Kurniawan & Khademi-Vidra, 2024) show that converting farmland into agritourism areas carries environmental, economic, and socio-cultural consequences that do not always align. That finding is relevant to the case examined, because conversion can run in both directions and the reverse direction is rarely discussed.

Destination Failure and the Research Gap

The difficulties faced by agritourism providers have been studied, among others by (Connolly et al., 2022), who map operational challenges and how providers cope with them, (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007), who record the contradictions of agritourism development in Greece, and (Eshun & Tettey, 2014), who document the constraints on cocoa agritourism in Ghana. All of these studies examine destinations still in operation. Studies tracing the process by which a destination ceases to be agritourism remain very rare, particularly in the Southeast Asian context.

This is the gap the present study fills. Its focus is not comparison across destinations but the reconstruction of a process in a single case, on the assumption that a deviant case carries explanatory value of its own, as emphasised in the Grounded Theory tradition (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The same case has been examined along a different dimension by (Mistriani et al., 2026), which focuses on the loss of farmer–visitor interaction and its consequences for word-of-mouth communication. The present study complements that work by tracing the management and governance side, and by translating its findings into a diagnostic instrument.

3. Materials and Method

Approach and Position of the Case

The study employs a qualitative approach using *Grounded Theory* procedures in the tradition of *Strauss* as formulated by (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), rooted in the work of (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and developed in several streams, including the constructivist tradition (Charmaz, 2014). The procedure was chosen because the study aims to explain a social process rather than to measure relationships among variables. Agrowisata Sodong is positioned as an instrumental case, that is, a case selected not to be understood intrinsically but to yield understanding of a broader phenomenon. Adaptation of the procedure to the Indonesian tourism research context follows (Ihalauw et al., 2023).

It should be noted that this article forms a small part of an umbrella study covering five agritourism destinations in Indonesia (Mistriani, 2026). The restriction to a single case is deliberate, so that the reconstruction of the process can be presented whole, without burdening the discussion with cross-destination comparison.

Site, Informants, and Data Collection

The research site is Agrowisata Sodong in Semarang City, Central Java, located in a lowland zone at an elevation of roughly 200 to 400 metres above sea level. Before it ceased operating in 2023, the area was managed by a local private operator with lowland horticultural commodities as the basis of its attraction. Data collection was carried out between 2025 and 2026.

Informants were determined through theoretical selection, with the criteria of direct involvement in the management or supervision of the destination and command of the chronology of events. Three informants were obtained and are presented in Table 1. The limited number of informants is a consequence of the destination's closure, so that no group of active visitors was available. This limitation was offset by the depth of the interviews and by document tracing.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants.

Code	Role	Epistemological Category	Data Contribution
AS-P1	Site tourism manager	Key informant (P)	Management chronology, conversion decisions, land condition
AS-ST1	Officer of the Sub-district Community Empowerment Institution (LPMK)	Supporting informant (ST)	Perspective of the surrounding community, dynamics of farmer involvement
AS-ST2	Sub-coordinator, Semarang City Tourism Office	Supporting informant (ST)	Policy perspective, land status, destination development support

Source: Authors' field data, 2025–2026.

Data collection techniques comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation of the area's condition after conversion, and document tracing covering secondary visitation data and destination development records. Interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis and Data Trustworthiness

Analysis was conducted with NVivo 14 software through open coding and axial coding, accompanied by *constant comparative analysis* across informants' statements. The transcripts produced 87 question-and-answer pairs, subsequently reduced to 89 substantive notes. The number of notes exceeds the number of pairs because several answers contained more than one unit of meaning, coded separately. Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation among the manager, the community, and the local government; technique triangulation among interviews, observation, and documents; and independent re-checking of the coding by two researchers, following the recommendation of (Creswell & Poth, 2023) on the use of CAQDAS to maintain an audit trail.

4. Results and Discussion

Chronology of the Functional Reversal

The data show that the functional reversal of Agrowisata Sodong unfolded as a sequence rather than as an event. In the initial stage the area operated on an agricultural basis with cultural content. Pressure began to appear when a change in land status coincided with visitor demand for family recreation facilities. The manager responded by adding water rides as a supplementary attraction. The addition was originally positioned as a complement, but within a few visiting seasons it shifted the centre of gravity of the whole area.

“In the end what happened was a shift of function: from agriculture-based agritourism to water-ride-based family recreation, with the remnants of farming activity still present but no longer the main focus.” (AS-P1, Manager of Agrowisata Sodong, 2025)

The local government's perspective confirms that the shift ran counter to the tendency of other destinations.

“Agrowisata Sodong is a clear example of a destination management paradigm shift running in reverse: from agricultural and cultural tourism, then adapting into water recreation because of the change in land status and the pressure of short-term visitor demand.” (AS-ST2, Semarang City Tourism Office, 2025)

In the next stage, farmer involvement contracted. Once the direction of development was decided in favour of recreation because it was thought to generate returns more quickly, the farmers who had previously been the backbone of activity in the area withdrew gradually. Their withdrawal removed the principal source of the interaction that constituted the agritourism attraction, and at the same time halted the management of productive land that had served as the area's visual setting.

“At first there was conflict about the direction of development, whether to stay focused on farming or move to recreational rides. When the decision finally went to recreation because it was seen as generating returns faster, the farmers who had been the backbone began to withdraw one by one. After that, everything was just a memory.” (AS-ST1, LPMK Officer, 2025)

The final stage was marked by the disappearance of agritourism content while the area's name was retained. Land and farmers remained physically present, but neither was any longer connected to the visit experience.

“The Sodong farmland is still there, but it is not actively managed for production that visitors can enjoy. The farmers are still there, but they are no longer part of the attraction. What remains is only the water rides and the picnic area. The agritourism is just a name now.” (AS-P1, Manager of Agrowisata Sodong, 2025)

The sequence is summarised in Table 2. This staging is an analytical reconstruction from the informants' narratives, not an administrative periodisation found in official documents.

Table 2. Reconstruction of the Stages of Functional Reversal at Agrowisata Sodong.

Stage	Condition of the Area	Trigger	Empirical Marker
Initial	Operating on an agricultural basis with cultural content	Development as an urban agritourism destination	Farming activity as the main attraction
Pressure	Demand for family recreation facilities emerges alongside a change in land status	Short-term market pressure and land tenure certainty	Water rides added as a complement
Transition	The centre of attraction moves to the water rides	Development decisions favour quick revenue	Conflict over the direction of development left unresolved
Contraction	Farmers withdraw gradually; land no longer managed for visits	Loss of role and incentive for farmers	Farmer–visitor interaction ceases
Cessation	The area ceases to operate as agritourism from 2023	Accumulation of all preceding stages	Agritourism identity survives only in the name

Source: Research data processed with NVivo 14, 2026.

Five Prerequisites That Collapsed

The *axial coding* analysis shows that the failure of Sodong can be read through five prerequisites, none of which was met. First, there was no active conservation of land; the land was retained in existence but no longer treated as a tourism asset. Second, there was no empowerment; farmers and the community had no role in management decisions. Third, governance failed because internal conflict over the direction of development was never resolved. Fourth, there was no innovation; stagnation of the offering caused the area to lose its distinguishing appeal. Fifth, there was no social philosophy; the orientation shifted from values to simple transaction.

“Farming is now preserved more because of the farmers' own needs than because of any tourism concept. The land is retained, but it is no longer regarded as a tourism asset. The focus has changed.” (AS-ST1, LPMK Officer, 2025)

That statement reveals a separation between the physical presence of farming and its function as a constituent of the experience. Within the typology of (Phillip et al., 2010), this separation moves the area out of the agritourism category even though its landscape still displays agricultural elements. The finding reinforces the argument of (Ahrabous et al., 2025) that the benefits of agritourism depend on the continued functioning of the underlying farming system: when that system stops, the benefits stop with it, even if visitation continues for a time thanks to substitute attractions.

The Mechanism of Cumulative Failure

The most important finding from this case lies not in the list of collapsed prerequisites but in the manner of the collapse. The data show no single large decision that caused the closure. What emerges instead is an accumulation of small decisions, each of which appeared reasonable when it was taken: one plot of productive land converted into parking because visitor demand had risen, one departing farmer not replaced on grounds of cost, one training programme cancelled because the budget was thinning. Taken separately, not one of those decisions deserves to be called a mistake. Taken collectively, they eroded the foundations of the area.

The mechanism has two properties worth noting. The first is that it is cumulative: the effect of each decision is not felt in the period in which it is taken but accumulates in subsequent periods. The second is that it is non-linear: the loss of one prerequisite weakens the others, so the rate of decline accelerates over time. The collapse of participatory governance, for instance, does not stop with itself but halts empowerment, which in turn halts land conservation, which in its turn removes the reason for innovation.

No single decision. Each small decision looked rational when it was taken.



Figure 1. The Mechanism of Cumulative Failure in the Agrowisata Sodong Case.

Source: Authors' construction from field findings, 2026.

Figure 1 shows that sequence of collapse together with the reinforcing arrow at the bottom. That arrow indicates that the relationships among the foundations are not a one-way chain. When land conservation stops, the reason for farmers to remain involved also thins, so an already weak empowerment grows weaker still. It is this mutually contagious quality that distinguishes cumulative failure from ordinary gradual decline, and that explains why the interval between the transition stage and the cessation stage was relatively short.

The consequence for monitoring practice is serious. During the transition stage, visitor numbers do not fall immediately because the water rides supply a substitute attraction, so the visitation indicator gives a reassuring signal precisely while the foundations are eroding. This finding aligns with the critique by (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024) of the dominance of economic indicators in agritourism management.

Table 3. Surface Indicators Compared with Foundation Indicators in the Sodong Case.

Aspect	Surface Indicator	Foundation Indicator	Condition at the Transition Stage
Visitation	Number of visitors per period	Share of visits involving interaction with farming activity	Numbers stable; share of interaction falls sharply
Land	Area of land available	Area of productive land managed for visits	Total area unchanged; productive land shrinks
Farmers	Number of farmers around the area	Number of farmers with a role in the visit experience	Numbers unchanged; role lost
Revenue	Gross revenue of the area	Share of revenue returning to the community	Revenue rose for a time; the flow to the community stopped

Source: Authors' construction from field findings, 2026.

Formulating the Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model

This section translates the findings into an instrument usable by other destinations. The basis for that translation is one simple observation: the five foundations did not collapse at once but passed through stages that left observable markers. If those stages can be recognised earlier, the erosion can still be halted.

The proposed model is named the Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model, abbreviated as the AFE Model. It comprises three components. The first is the five foundations, which form the rows of the assessment. The second is the four stages of erosion, which form the columns: intact, eroding, displaced, and severed. The third is the reading rule that establishes when a manager must act. The structure of the model is presented in Figure 2.

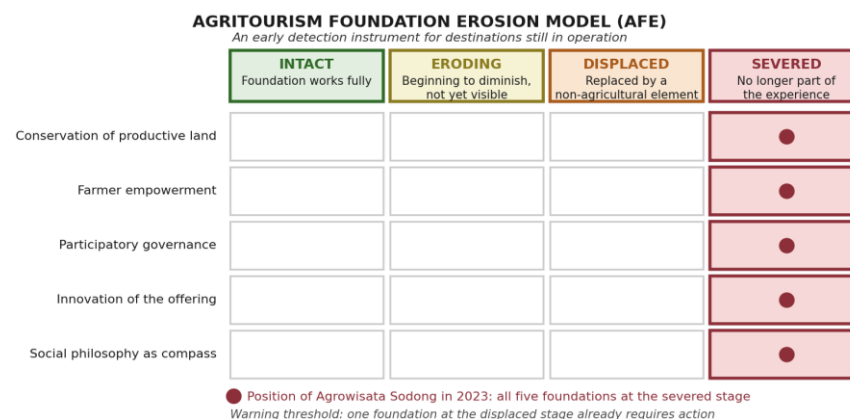


Figure 2. The Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model as an Early Detection Instrument.

Source: Authors' construction from field findings, 2026.

The four stages in Figure 2 are distinguished by the relationship between a foundation and the visit experience, not by its physical condition. At the intact stage, the foundation works fully and forms part of what visitors experience. At the eroding stage, the foundation begins to diminish but is not yet visible to visitors because it remains masked by other attractions. At the displaced stage, the foundation is still physically present but its position as the main attraction has been taken over by a non-agricultural element. At the severed stage, the foundation ceases to be part of the experience even though it may still physically exist. This distinction between physical presence and connection to the experience is the core of the model, and it comes directly from the informants' statements that the land and the farmers were still there but no longer part of the attraction.

To be usable, each foundation requires a concrete diagnostic question together with its threshold marker. These are set out in Table 4. The marker in the third column is placed at the displaced stage rather than at the severed stage, because the data show that recovery after the severed stage is far more difficult: the practical knowledge and social relations that sustain visit activity cannot be rebuilt quickly.

Table 4. AFE Model Diagnostic Instrument for Destinations Still in Operation.

Foundation	Diagnostic question	Marker of the displaced stage (action threshold)
Conservation of productive land	What share of productive land is genuinely managed as part of the visit?	Productive plots are converted into parking or facilities without equivalent replacement of productive land
Farmer empowerment	Do farmers have a role in the visit experience and in management decisions?	Departing farmers are not replaced, and no farmer is involved in designing visit packages
Participatory governance	Is there a forum capable of resolving differences over the direction of development?	Differences of direction are settled unilaterally on the criterion of revenue speed, without deliberation
Innovation of the offering	When was the agriculture-based offering last renewed?	New attractions consist entirely of non-agricultural facilities across two consecutive visiting seasons
Social philosophy	What criterion is used when two interests collide?	No explicit statement of priorities exists, so decisions fall to the criterion that is easiest to measure

Source: Authors' construction from field findings, 2026.

The reading rule for the model is set as follows. A single foundation at the displaced stage is already sufficient to require action, without waiting for the others to erode. This provision derives from the mutually contagious quality identified in Figure 1, and it is deliberately conservative because the cost of a false alarm is far lower than the cost of detecting too late. In the case of Agrowisata Sodong, all five foundations had already reached the severed stage by the time the condition was recognised, so no entry point for recovery remained.

The AFE Model differs from conventional sustainability assessment frameworks in two respects: it measures the distance towards failure rather than achievement, and it assesses the connection between a foundation and the visit experience rather than the availability of resources. It is the second difference that allows the model to keep signalling while land and farmers remain, on paper, still present.

Theoretical Discussion

The Sodong case offers four notes for the agritourism literature. The first concerns the status of farming within the definition of agritourism. The data show that active farming functions as a foundation, not as ornament. When farming ceases to be part of the experience, every other dimension loses its footing: there is nothing to be watched as a process, nothing to be done alongside farmers, and no story for visitors to take home. This finding reinforces the working-farm criterion in the typology of (Phillip et al., 2010) and gives it empirical support from the opposite direction, namely through its absence.

The second note concerns authenticity. (MacCannell, 1973) explains how tourist space constructs a display of authenticity for visitors. The Sodong case shows the reverse situation, one rarely discussed: not authenticity staged, but authenticity abandoned without equivalent replacement. The area then competed in an arena that did not favour it, the arena of recreational facilities, against providers with far greater capital.

The third note concerns governance. Conflict over the direction of development is fundamentally a conflict of values: whether the area is positioned as a unit of production that opens itself to visits, or as a unit of recreation that happens to have an agricultural backdrop. The absence of an explicit philosophy meant that the conflict was settled by the criterion easiest to measure, namely the speed of generating revenue. This finding intersects with the observation by (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007) on the internal contradictions of agritourism development, while also affirming the importance of community participation as emphasised by (Cavalleri et al., 2022).

The fourth note concerns the loss of story material. (Guleria et al., 2024) show that memorable experiences drive visitors to tell others about their visit. In the Sodong case, the severing of the foundations erased that source of stories, so the cheapest promotional channel ceased to work as well. (Mistriani et al., 2026) traces this mechanism in greater detail along the social and communication dimension.

Applying the Model to Destinations Still in Operation

For managers of destinations still in operation, the AFE Model can be run as a periodic self-assessment, for example once at the end of each visiting season. The procedure is simple: answer the five diagnostic questions in Table 4, mark the position of each foundation on Figure 2, then check whether any foundation has reached the displaced stage. The assessment should involve farmers and not only managers, because the data in this case show that the withdrawal of farmers was read earlier by the surrounding community than by the site management.

The action that follows the assessment depends on which foundation has been displaced. If it is land conservation, the action is to establish a minimum share of productive land that may not be converted. If it is empowerment, the action is to return the farmers' role to the visit package together with a clear revenue-sharing arrangement. If it is governance, the action is to establish a forum for resolving differences of direction before those differences harden. If it is social philosophy, the action is to set out priorities in writing, so that subsequent decisions have a reference other than the speed of revenue.

For local governments, the five diagnostic questions can be added to annual destination development forms without any meaningful additional data collection burden, since all of them can be answered through an ordinary field visit. The addition gives the tourism office a signal unavailable from visitation data, as shown in Table 3. For farming communities, the model provides a basis for raising objections in measurable terms: so long as erosion is felt only as discomfort it is difficult to voice, but once it can be pointed to as a specific position on a jointly agreed instrument, the objection has a footing.

It must be stressed that this model is derived from a single case and has not been tested on other destinations. Its status is that of a proposal requiring testing, not a validated instrument. Its use is therefore recommended as a trigger for internal discussion rather than as a basis for formal assessment of management performance.

5. Conclusion

This study has explained how Agrowisata Sodong in Semarang City ceased to be agritourism and shifted function into a water-ride-based recreation area. The process unfolded through five stages — initial, pressure, transition, contraction, and cessation — triggered by a change in land status and by short-term demand pressure. The failure was marked by the simultaneous non-fulfilment of five prerequisites: conservation of productive land, farmer empowerment, governance capable of resolving conflicts of direction, innovation of the offering, and social philosophy as a compass for decisions.

The mechanism that explains the failure is cumulative and non-linear. No single decision caused the closure; what occurred was an accumulation of small decisions, each of which appeared rational. This cumulative quality explains why the reversal of function was not halted even though it was witnessed by the manager, the community, and the local government: the signal of decline did not appear in the indicators customarily monitored.

On the basis of these findings, the Agritourism Foundation Erosion Model was formulated. It maps the five foundations across four stages of erosion — intact, eroding, displaced, and severed — and sets the action threshold at the displaced stage. The model is accompanied by five diagnostic questions answerable through an ordinary field visit, so that it can be used by destinations still in operation and by regional tourism offices without meaningful additional data collection burden.

The theoretical implication is that active farming needs to be treated as a definitional prerequisite of agritourism rather than as a supplementary attribute. The practical implication is that monitoring agritourism destinations requires foundation indicators alongside visitation indicators, because visitation indicators give a reassuring signal precisely while the foundations are eroding.

The study has limitations that should be stated openly. First, the number of informants was limited to three because the destination had ceased operating, so no group of active visitors was available. Second, the reconstruction of the chronology rests on informants' recollections and cannot be fully verified through administrative documents. Third, the findings derive from a single case in a lowland urban agritourism context and are therefore not intended for generalisation. Fourth, the AFE Model is derived from a single failure case and has not been tested on destinations still in operation, so its predictive power is unknown. Further research is recommended to test the AFE Model on a set of active agritourism destinations, in order to examine whether the position of a foundation on the instrument genuinely relates to destination resilience, and to test the cumulative failure pattern on conversion cases outside the lowland urban context.

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Data Availability Statement: The data supporting the findings of this study, consisting of interview transcripts and the NVivo 14 project file, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, with certain restrictions to protect the confidentiality of informants' identities.

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