

Eco-Agritourism as a Means to Preserve Culture and the Environment

By Nikki Rose, Founder of Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries

Abstract

The benefits of eco-agritourism are discussed as a way for rural communities to help preserve their distinctive cultural and natural heritage. Since 1997, Nikki Rose has supported the efforts of more than 40 small businesses and individuals working on action programs to preserve Crete's heritage. Rose formed a network of organic farmers, artisan producers, chefs, lodge owners, historians, nature conservationists and many other residents to collaborate on a range of dynamic educational programs. By rekindling resident and visitor interest in culture and nature, eco-agritourism can simultaneously help sustain communities, encourage expansion of organic agriculture and provide an extraordinary visitor experience.

Introduction

Crete is blessed with a fascinating history spanning four thousand-plus years, natural beauty and an abundance of healthy food choices, both wild and cultivated. There is much to discover and enjoy. There is also much to protect. Beyond the seaside resorts and imposing limestone cliffs are people preserving their heritage (sustainable organic farmers, artisan bread bakers, cheese makers, beekeepers, chefs and many others). They are maintaining what most of us have lost touch with – a connection between themselves, their community and nature. Their knowledge of sustainable living practices is beneficial to the global community. Many people around the world are striving to “return to the land,” while many people in rural Crete have never left the land. But modern society beckons and rural communities are abandoned or developed.

Methods

Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries (CCS) introduces visitors to residents like Yiorgos, who maintains his small family farm much like his ancestors, using sustainable organic methods. He refuses to buy food from outside sources and even collects salt from a rocky beach nearby. “The chicken I eat must first dine at my house,” he says. When we travel to foreign lands, it seems so natural to connect with residents outside of the tourism industry, to spend time in their villages and enjoy a leisurely meal together. CCS offers this opportunity. Before we eat bread, we meet farmers to see how grains are cultivated. Before we sample olive oil, we meet the farmers at their groves and factories. Before we sample cheese, we meet shepherds to discover how his or her flocks live – roaming the slopes and eating wild plants. Many wild plants are used in cooking and natural medicine, which we discover during hikes in the countryside and cooking demonstrations.

The renowned traditional healthy cuisine of Crete is not a phenomenon; it's a matter of respecting the land and the bounties it provides. Every great chef will tell you that they are only as good as their ingredients. The foundation of the Mediterranean diet concept is

fresh, local, organic food and a clean environment. Both residents and visitors benefit from community-based preservation programs. Careful consideration and strong alliances are required to sustain these programs. CCS celebrates Crete's heritage in an ethical and professional manner. Residents are investing their time and money to share valuable knowledge. Our seminars offer visitors a rare opportunity to discover the heart of Crete and obtain information that can enrich their lives.

Tourism and agriculture are primary industries in Crete. The majority of tourism planners support generic services, such as large beach resorts and continental food. Most operations are of little benefit to local communities in terms of providing financial stability or protecting Crete's cultural and natural heritage. More than 70% of Crete's residents are still involved in agriculture – primarily olive oil and wine production on a part-time basis. Both industries compete for increasingly scarce natural resources, commonly referred to as “the war on water.” CCS promotes the benefits of educational travel via the window of traditional food ways. As agriculture is an integral part of Crete's culture, our programs center on the work of organic farmers and interrelated preservation work to serve several purposes at once.

Industrial agriculture in Crete is comprised of cooperatives, some of which represent hundreds of families cultivating a variety of produce on small plots of land. Slowly, some cooperatives and individuals are converting to organic production. Yet, they face challenges if their neighbors are growing conventionally and public entities are not supporting their work. A growing number of specialized organic farmers are implementing projects. Most producers have incorporated agritourism into their work to promote their products, share their knowledge and generate supplemental income. Not all producers or stakeholders are collaborating with residents involved in interrelated preservation work that can enhance the quality of agritourism and the quality of life for residents.

Implementing Responsible Travel in the Case of Eco-Agritourism

The fact that a destination has excellent cuisine and nature reserves does not mean that communities are able to open up the area to visitors. Before residents invite visitors to their villages and farms, they need to consider how they will present and sustain their programs and protect their communities.

Since most of us are not farmers, we don't know what to expect from an agritourism experience. Agritourism is meant to support farmers and their communities. In the case of organic agriculture, it also helps to protect our environment. Agritourism can make a difference as part of the bigger picture of preservation and responsible travel. Organic farming is a lifelong commitment, not a “9 to 5” position. Supplying the world with excellent food and wine is more challenging than we might ever know or appreciate. While it's a lovely notion if farmers or fishers could take the day off to entertain us, we are asking for the world. The time they devote to sharing their knowledge with us is a rare privilege.

Responsible travel covers a lot of ground today. There are interrelated categories – eco,

sustainable, ethical, green, geo, etc. The bottom line is that people are actively working to support and protect the communities in which they live, work or visit. Responsible travel is part of the solution to a growing number of global issues relating to social inequality, exploitation, cultural preservation, food safety and environmental protection. It's a fine theory, embraced the world over, yet the practice is challenging. While the number of responsible travel practitioners increases, the number of travelers partaking in such beneficial programs is minimal. Many people say they prefer "real" or "ethical" travel experiences, yet they are unaware that local communities must justly benefit from the services they provide.

It is the responsible travel practitioner's job to develop valuable programs and create awareness of that value, which will be offered at a fair price. Preservation work is a partnership between providers and beneficiaries. Enjoying an action-packed series of cultural activities requires the participation of many local people. It must be financially rewarding, otherwise the arrangement is not mutually beneficial or ethical.

Results: Sharing the Benefits of Responsible Travel

By tailoring small-group seminars in harmony with the seasons, cultural and environmental impacts, availability of residents and interests of attendees, CCS has the advantage of flexibility. In consideration of our collective and individual projects, CCS seminars serve a dual purpose (to support local preservation work and share those benefits with visitors). We link organic farmers with other members of the community through:

- 1) our educational programs
- 2) staying in locally-owned lodges and eco-lodges
- 3) providing free training and referral services
- 4) global promotion of projects
- 5) sharing seminar revenues (in contrast with standard tourism practices)

Many travelers benefit from community-based preservation work. We stress that communities must benefit the most if we expect to enjoy such services, including excellent fresh, local organic cuisine. CCS acts as a gateway for communities to expand or create their own programs.

There are established Women's Agricultural Cooperatives in Crete, producing and selling traditional products within their communities or beyond, depending on their resources and support for their work. There are also excellent home cooks, gardeners and artisan producers that do not have the resources to join cooperatives or host visitors. CCS invites residents from varied backgrounds to participate in our programs. By collaborating with the community, eco-agritourism stretches beyond the boundaries of a single farm. Communities maintain their way of life as they choose, rather than altering it to suit an outsider's vision of foreign travel.

Eco-agritourism must be advantageous for communities. Otherwise, there is no incentive to provide these valuable services or expand organic production. Our approach can be implemented anywhere in the world. Eco-agritourism is a business run by accomplished

professionals. All beneficiaries – the public and private sectors, the media and travelers need to be aware of the value of these programs. CCS is an internationally acclaimed responsible travel program. We also organize workshops for colleagues and our success has encouraged others to follow our lead.

Discussion: Promoting Responsible Travel

As with all market trends, travel providers offering alternative forms of tourism in an unethical manner is damaging to authentic programs. As long as the majority of media and travel agencies instill the message that “cheap travel deals are the way of the world,” people will not be aware of the true cost of travel, including the environmental and social impact that travel has on communities or the true cost of safe food. The majority of travel agencies are not yet trained in ethical travel practices. It requires that they modify their business practices and form mutually beneficial partnerships with local communities. More travelers are asking agencies questions such as, “How does your company contribute to the well being of local people and their environment?”

While responsible travel options are increasing, practitioners are competing with volume discount travel and powerful public relations campaigns that overshadow their distinctive work. Mass media rarely covers small-scale programs because there is no apparent benefit to them. Discount deals cut in mega travel cannot be cut in rural communities. Most media outlets expect free food and lodging, consultancy and entertainment. Small-scale practitioners cannot afford this form of advertising, nor are they certain to benefit from it, as the coverage is rarely specific to their work and could be subjective. The first step to launch a small-scale program is from the ground up in collaboration with other local businesses, advocacy groups and public agencies, if possible. With the rapid growth of responsible travel advocacy groups, entrepreneurs’ participation in programs is increasing. Responsible travel is not a trend; it is a necessity.

Conclusion

Responsible travel, in the case of eco-agritourism, provides a wide range of benefits to communities and visitors. It provides an opportunity for entrepreneurs and travelers to be active participants in sustainable development programs. It requires direct collaboration with preservationists and tangible returns on their investments. Responsible travel can help preserve our world’s sanctuaries and even reverse some damage caused by unsustainable development. It can build meaningful careers for future generations and protect the very reason why people visit countries like Greece – to discover her significant cultural legacy and natural beauty.

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For more information on Nikki Rose and Crete's Culinary Sanctuaries seminars, projects, awards and press: www.cookingincrete.com