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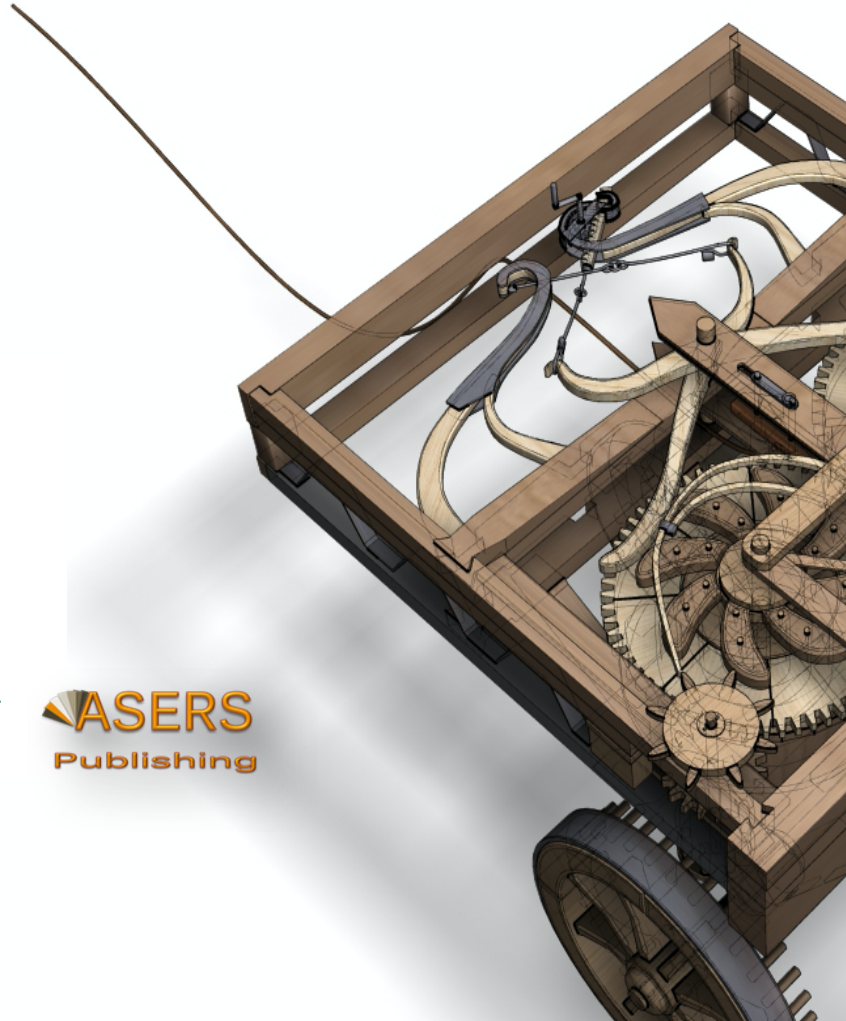
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Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism is an interdisciplinary research journal, aimed to publish articles and original research papers that should contribute to the development of both experimental and theoretical nature in the field of Environmental Management and Tourism Sciences.

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Rural Farms as a Strategy for the Development of Agritourism: A Study in the City of Milagro, Ecuador

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Abstract:

This article aims to evaluate the current conditions of rural farms located in Milagro-Ecuador to analyze the importance of development of agritourism in this city. The study was carried out through the application of a questionnaire to know the perspectives of the owners of tourist farms. The findings showed that most of the tourist farms in the city are managed by the family, main activity of the farms is still agriculture, however they have decided to invest in tourism as an activity of additional economic income, that indicates that farm-based tourism in farming offers some potential to generate supplemental revenues. This study provides useful information for understand this kind of business and its implications in order to facilitate the integrated and Sustainable Tourism Planning of this city.

Keywords: Rural tourism; agritourism; farms tourism; development.

JEL Classification: M10; R11; Z32.

Introduction

Tourism was, and still largely is, concentrated into specialist beach, lake and mountain resort areas, and into major cultural centres, but in recent years, the rise of the independent traveller, seeking a non-resort-based or rural holiday, has now added a new dimension to the travel industry (Weiler & Hall 1992; Carvache-Franco *et al.* 2020). This trend towards holidays in the countryside has considerable potential as a tool for economic regeneration. That is one of the major reasons why administrations which have rural remits have begun to develop an interest in tourism development.

Rural areas have a very important and growing role in the context of leisure and tourism (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009; Carvache-Franco *et al.* 2022). The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has declared 2020 as the Year of Rural Tourism and Rural Development. In this sense, it recognizes the capacity of tourism to promote the development of rural areas. Tourism, on occasion, can also be understood as a complement to traditional economic activities, such as agriculture.

In Ecuador, in the field of rural tourism, consolidated experiences coexist, such as community tourism, and proposals implemented by the Ministry of Tourism (2019). In this way, as the National Tourism Plan 2030 demonstrates, the Ecuadorian government continues to bet on strengthening tourism development in rural areas, with community experiences, but also creating new products. Examples of these new formulas are the development of agrotourism through cocoa and chocolate or the revitalization of towns through the implementation of the Magical Towns program.

The Ministry of Tourism (2020) together with representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture implemented an Agrotourism and Ecological Tourism project as a strategy to reactivate the sector after the COVID-19 emergency. This prompted national and foreign tourists to generate direct experiences with the communities in the country and learn about the production of different products.

This program focused on generating a new model in the development of tourism products that rescue the traditions and customs that make communities unique. It will also strengthen the work of companies that already offer this type of activity.

This study aims to evaluate the current conditions of the rural farms located in Milagro city which can serve as support for the development of agritourism that generates greater local economic development. To achieve this goal, the document includes the following sections: introduction, literature review, description of the research area, methods, results and discussion.

This information will serve as a link to understand the importance of agritourism in this city to promote integrated and sustainable tourism planning.

1. Literature Review. Rural Tourism and Agritourism

Rural tourism has become an alternative development strategy for some rural areas (Sharpley & Jepson 2011; Carvache-Franco *et al.* 2023) and is becoming an increasingly important component of rural landscapes and communities in some areas in the world. Changes in the agricultural sector have forced farmers to look for additional sources of income, one of which is agritourism. At the same time, increasing urbanization in the developed world has created a demand for guesthouses and vacations that city residents see as a comfortable, idyllic contrast to their own working lives (Hjalager 1996).

According to UNWTO (2020), "rural tourism contributes to regional economic growth and prosperity through its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and job creation, and its capability to push the dissemination of demand in time (fight seasonality) and on a wider territory."

UNWTO (2020) understands Rural Tourism as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural Tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: i) low population density, ii) landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry and iii) traditional social structure and lifestyle".

Rural tourism includes various forms of tourism that are not exclusive, but rather complementary, such as adventure tourism, cultural, ecotourism, agritourism. A growing number of small farms are seeking off-farm activities beyond farm production to enhance their economic and social benefits (McGehee 2007; Saxena *et al.* 2007). These activities, called agricultural diversification, can take many forms, *e.g.*, Non-traditional animal husbandry and non-food crop production, green energy production, farming, tourism, etc.

Small farmers usually like tourism over alternative diversification activities, because of the perceived additional benefits of working from home while caring for children, and the opportunity to generate additional

income (Choo & Park 2022; Sharpley & Vass 2006, Knowd 2006). Farm tourism, often referred to as agritourism (hereafter agritourism), is also known for providing opportunities to sell agricultural products directly to consumers (Veeck *et al.* 2006) and to counteract social and economic issues – loss of sales, increased expenses, globalization, and others – related to the decline of ancient agriculture industries (McGehee 2007).

Agritourism is part of rural tourism, it's been conceptualized as associate “alternative farm enterprise”, comprising one in all many potential kinds of farm business diversification (Choo & Park 2022; Ilbery *et al.* 1998), offers economic opportunities, and hopes are expressed since the late Seventies that farm business enterprise might support native economies and contribute to the preservation of landscapes and cultural heritage within the country (cf. Drenoi, 1983).

Therefore, it is important to give due consideration to the development of rural tourism at the national level through strategic investments and proactive policies. One of her insights was that farmers need the right support and guidance to successfully integrate an agritourism business into their farm operations (Nematpour & Masood Khodadadi 2021).

In other words, agritourism is seen as an alternative agricultural activity that can potentially contribute to agricultural sustainability through the diversification of the rural economy, providing educational opportunities to urban visitors, thus increasing the value of rural communities. It has the added benefit of being able to create more community cohesion (Choo 2012; McGehee 2007).

Community participation is one of the key outcomes of the growth of rural tourism in some rural communities. In this regard, according to Hossein *et al.* (2014), the development of farm tourism enterprise in native communities' results in the participation of native folks in decision-making processes. Choo and Jamal (2009) argued that developing tourism in rural areas would increase the involvement of local people in the planning process of local attraction development. It also creates better communication between parties involved in political and decision-making processes. In this way, it was found that the role of the authorities who were able to encourage the participation of local residents in the community was important.

This form of farm tourism experience offers traditional rural hospitality, nature and culture experiences, and wellness-focused outdoor activities while helping farmers maintain agricultural profitability and diversify their economies (Veeck *et al.* 2006; Weaver & Fennell 1997).

The development of tourism activities in non-urban areas integrates private enterprises, cities and co-operative workers who gain income and economic independence for their families. This last aspect adds value as household items are made like souvenirs (McGehee, Kim and Jennings 2007).

Agritourism is a tourism activity that uses farms as tourism resources. Agricultural resources are transformed into services such as assessment of landscape features, diversity of agricultural production activities and techniques, and cultural experience communities (Ferniza 2017). Typologies are based on agricultural and non-agricultural activities. The most important are activities such as agricultural festivals, horseback riding, and vegetable and fruit tours. All these attributes given by nature (Budiasa & Ambarawati 2014; Ismail *et al.* 2020).

2. Study Area

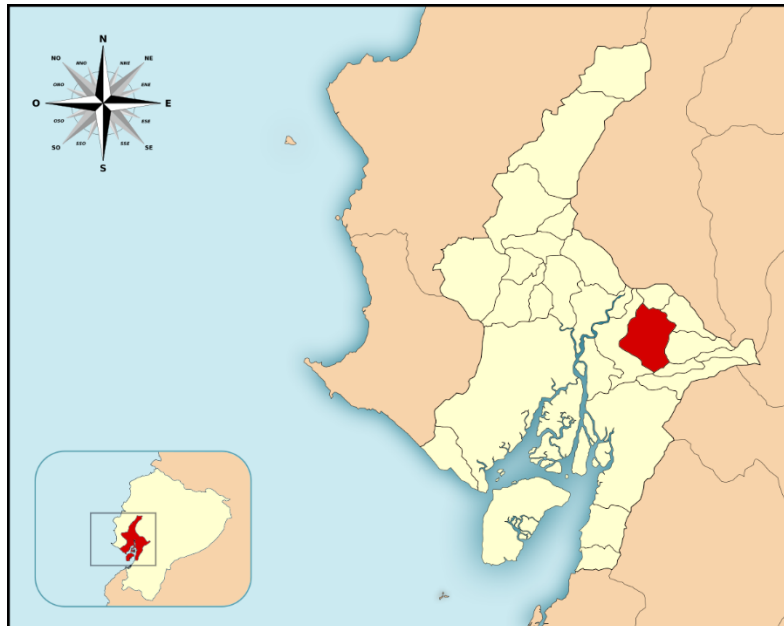
This study is limited to San Francisco de Milagro, a city in Ecuador, also known as "Milagro"; the second largest city in the province of Guayas, Ecuador (Figure 1). It is settled between 8 and 15 m.s.m. The average annual temperature is of the order of 25°C and the precipitation is 1361 mm. Known as the land of pineapples. Fruit is the most iconic product from this side of our productive coastal region. Therefore, it was given a special spot in the city, at the Sugar Route, for a huge monument. “History tells us that most Milagro families long ago devoted themselves to the cultivation of this sweet yellow commodity that formed the basis of their economic subsistence. At that time, production bordered the thousand hectares of crops, with a population of about 160 thousand inhabitants” (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2010).

While pineapple production is declining, many other activities are increasing. Locals are now finding alternative income in tourism activities, adding farming experiences on farmland.

Milagro is one of the most important cities in the province due to its concentration of commerce and the development of the agricultural production industry, among which the Valdez Sugar Industry stands out, enjoying a very good position in the national and international market in the production of sugar and its derivatives, Ecoelectric is a company specialized in the production of electrical energy from sugar cane bagasse (waste). Due to its favorable climate, Milagro has numerous nurseries, where a wide variety of ornamental plants are grown. Given the diversity, beauty and low cost of the plants, these nurseries are in high demand and acceptance both nationally and internationally. Most of the nurseries are located on the Milagro-Naranjito highway. It also has

plantations of pineapple, cocoa, banana, orange, watermelon among others, that's why Milagro has a complete touristic offer dedicated to agritourism.

Figure 1. Location of Milagro city, Ecuador



3. Methodology

The present empirical research is based on fieldwork that consist of some conducted surveys to 25 owners of the tourism farms, which represent the whole universe, from 4 to 22 July 2022. It is important to emphasize that Milagro is in an initiation stage in the tourist activity.

The study used multiple-choice questions, close questions, and the Likert scale (1932) to achieve reliable results and study objectives.

The survey builds on previous research on tourism farms and characteristics related to business performance which was proposed by Barbieri and Mshenga (2008). A face-to-face survey was developed, consisting of a set 15 of questions about the characteristics of agritourism farm, tourist services with greater demand, main source of income, the number of years working in tourism, support from government, business performance, touristic promotion, social media management, kind of crops, etc. (Ruiz *et al.* 2019; De Oliveira Santos *et al.* 2014).

A five-point Likert scale (1 not important and 5 very important) was used to measure, this was adopted for questions about support from government and the reasons to invest in tourism.

Milagro is a city that is beginning to work in rural tourism, it has 25 tourist farms, therefore, the survey was conducted to the entire universe was taken to carry out the study as mentioned earlier.

4. Results and Discussion

To improve the analysis of the applied survey, table 1 has been prepared with most the single-answer questions. The first question asked was if they know what rural tourism is, according to the results, the owners know what rural tourism 68%, and the 32% know a little about it. However, everybody identified the concept of agritourism, based on a series of assessment questions that allowed them to qualify the clarity of the concept, most of them relate to activities in the countryside, typical gastronomy, handicrafts, agriculture, traditional ways of life.

According to the main activity of the farm, 88% answered their farms is dedicated mainly to agriculture, only 8% have tourism as their main activity and 4% to cattle raising. Owners see agrotourism as an alternative activity to generate more income, this finding coincides with McGehee, 2007 and Sharpley & Vass, 2006. The same percentage represents their main economic income.

The farms in the city of Milagro have almost the same types of crops such as cocoa, corn, mango, pineapple, zapote, breadfruit, banana, mamey, lemon, orange, passion fruit, avocado, guaba, custard apple, coconut, etc., Cumanda Farm in addition to the above has hibiscus flower crops.

Regarding to public transportation, just 4% arrive near to the farm, the rest 84% don't. It can only be reached by private transport.

Respect to the question if the owners live in the same property where tourist services are offered, most of them 96% live within the farm, which indicates that rural housing becomes a multifunctional space in which residents find the possibility of increasing their income for concept of agritourism.

From the 25 properties studied, in 60% of cases the property has remained in the same family for two generations, 28% three generations and 12% is just the first generation. This indicates a permanence in land tenure.

In relation to support from government about training on topics of tourist interest from the public sector, they answered that 68% have received training, 32% have not. Those who answered Yes, specified that the institutions that trained were the Municipality of Milagro, the Prefecture of Guayas and the Ministry of Tourism. The 3 training topics were: gastronomy, handling of food and beverages, and customer service.

It also asked if they work with tour operators, 24% responded positively, while 76% do not. The farms that answered yes, mentioned that the operators with whom they work are from the city of Guayaquil.

Table 1. Characteristics of agritourism farms

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Knowledge of what agritourism is	Yes	17	68
	No	0	0
	A little	8	32
Farm is mainly dedicated to	Agriculture	22	88
	Cattle raising	1	4
	Touristic	2	8
Public transport arrives at the farm	Yes	1	4
	No	24	96
Owner lives inside the farm	Yes	24	96
	No	1	4
The property has remained in the same family for	First generation	3	12
	Second generation	15	60
	Third generation	7	28
Training on topics tourist	Yes	17	68
	No	8	32
Work with tour operators	Yes	6	24
	No	19	76

Regarding to what the administration of the tourist business owns, findings of this research show that most of the tourist farms in the city of Milagro lack a formal administrative organization for the productive areas of the companies. This question was multiple choice. Of the total number of farms, only 12% have an administrative office, 8% have an accountant, 4% have a community manager, no farm has an accounting system, or a marketing professional, or sellers to help with the marketing of tourist farms. 100% are family management.

In general, this type of business in Milagro is managed by the owners, as can be seen, they do not have an office to handle administrative matters and even have few operating staff.

Tabla 2. Characteristics of administration of farms tourism

Variable	Answers		
	N°	Percentage	Percentage of cases
Administrative Office	3	9,68	12
Accountant	2	6,45	8
Accounting system	0	0,00	0
Community manager	1	3,23	4
Marketing worker	0	0,00	0
Sellers	0	0,00	0
Family management	25	80,65	100

According to the promotion, most of it (100%) of rural tourism businesses is done through social media and word of mouth, 24% use radio, 20% have attended fairs and exhibitions, 16% use triptych, posters, the same percentage fam trips (familiarization trips). It is important to emphasize that some farms have appeared on television, but because they have been invited to a program, but no farm has paid for TV advertising due to its high costs.

Table 3. Tourist promotion of farms

Variable	Answers		
	N°	Percentage	Percentage of cases
Tv	0	0	0,00
Radio	6	8,70	24,00
Social media	25	36,23	100,00
Web site	0	0,00	0,00
Word of mouth mkt	25	36,23	100,00
Triptych, posters	4	5,80	16,00
Billboards	0	0,00	0,00
Fam trips	4	5,80	16,00
Press trips	0	0,00	0,00
Fairs and exhibitions	5	7,25	20,00
Tourism offices	0	0,00	0,00

In the previous question, all the owners mentioned that they use social media as a way of promotion, so they were asked who manages them, the results were that 96% are managed by a family member and 4% by a community manager.

Table 4. Social media management

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Family member	24	96
Community manager	1	4

Table 5 shows the results of the type of support they need from the public sector and its importance level. A five-point Likert scale (1 not important and 5 very important) was used. The Likert scale is used to measure the attitudes of several interrelated variables (Likert 1932); therefore, its use in this study is justified.

The surveyed chose and rated their importance level about the type of support the farms need from the public sect through 5 points Likert scale. According to this table, the mostly valued variables were: Tourist promotion (4.44), Security (4.08), Signage (3.48), Road accessibility (3.24). On the other hand, the less valued variables were: Trainings (3.08) and Street lighting (2.08). All of them mentioned that in one way or another they need the urgent support of government entities.

These findings are agreed to Nematpour & Masood Khodadadi (2021), they consider the farmers require proper assistance and guidance to successfully integrate farm tourism businesses into their farm operations.

Table 5. Support required from government

Variable	Average	Ranking
Trainings	3,08	5
Tourist promotion	4,44	1
Road accessibility	3,24	4
Signage	3,48	3
Security	4,08	2
Street lighting	2,08	6

Regarding to the type of tourists who visit the farms, Table 6 shows that 100% of the farms receive local and national tourists, only 12% of the farms receive foreign tourists.

Table 6. Type of tourist

Variable	Answers		
	N°	Percentage	Percentage of cases
Local	25	47	100
National	25	47	100
Foreign	3	6	12

Table 7 shows the results of the reasons why the farm owners decided to invest in tourism. A five-point Likert scale (1 not important and 5 very important) was used to measure them.

According to this table, the mostly valued variables were: Diversification of economic activity (4.64), Improves quality of life (4.44), Increase revenue (4.32), Inactivity area of the property (3.16). Greater social interaction in the field (2.32), Demand for tourism (2.24) and Natural beauty on property (1.56). As you can see, the main reasons are associated with the economic part.

Results similar (Knowd, 2006) that indicates that farm-based tourism in farming offers some potential to generate supplemental revenues. Farm tourism also has fewer uncertainties in diversifying the economy of farming communities, rural tourism has emerged as an alternative development strategy for many rural areas (Sharpley 2005; McGehee 2007)

Table 7. Reasons to invest in tourism

Variable	Average	Ranking
Diversification of economic activity	4,64	1
Demand for tourism	2,24	6
Increase revenue	4,32	3
Natural beauty on property	1,56	7
Greater social interaction in the field	2,32	5
Inactivity area of the property	3,16	4
Improves quality of life	4,44	2

In relation with the services of the farms, 100% offer tour with a walk through the farm and a fruit harvest, 48% offer gastronomy, 40% camping, 20% artisan production of chocolate and event sites, and less percentage other services such as Horseback riding, fishing, handicrafts, etc. Some of these activities are mencionated in the findings by Budiasa (2013) and Ismail *et al.* (2020), it's also an avenue for direct marketing of their agricultural products to consumers as said Veeck *et al.* (2006). It is important to emphasize the stay of the visitors is only during the day, that is, the majority do not spend the night in the place.

The same ratio of percentages has the services with the highest economic income.

Table 8. Tourist services of the farms

Variable	Answers		
	N°	Percentage	Percentage of cases
Lodging	1	1,08	4,00
Gastronomy	12	12,90	48,00
Farm Tours	25	26,88	100,00
Fishing	2	2,15	8,00
Horseback riding	3	3,23	12,00
Handicrafts	2	2,15	8,00
Event sites	5	5,38	20,00
Artisan production of chocolate	5	5,38	20,00
Artisanal elaboration of the clay pot	1	1,08	4,00
Milking	1	1,08	4,00
Fruit harvest	25	26,88	100,00
Spa	1	1,08	4,00
Camping	10	10,75	40,00

Table 9. Year they start working

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
2022	1	4
2021	2	8
2020	1	4
2019	8	32
2018	7	28
2017	2	8
2016	1	4
2015	2	8
2008	1	4

Regarding to the question since what year have you been working in tourism. It can be said that the year 2018 was the great beginning of agrotourism in the city of Milagro, 28% of the farms start working from this year, the following year there is an upturn of new farms (32%) motivated by the first. This finding indicates that the tourist activity in this city related to agritourism and it's relatively new.

Conclusions and Limitations

This paper set out to evaluate the current conditions of the rural farms located in Milagro in order to support for the development of agritourism and this generates greater local economic development.

The results showed the main reasons why the farm owners decided to invest in tourism were: Diversification of economic activity, improves quality of life and increase revenue, three variables are related with the economic part, this indicates that farm-based tourism in farming offers some potential to generate supplemental revenues.

For this reason, the number of agritourist farms in Milagro is increasing year by year, even the surveyed mentioned that in the future they want to build cabins so that visitors can spend the night, since currently most do not have that service. This means that they want to continue with the activity of agritourism.

This activity is relatively new; therefore, owners require support for government to generate better infrastructure, especially roads accessibility, tourist promotion, security and signage.

Nowadays agritourism is the best strategy for social and economic development, tourism is widely believed to see as a way for local development, in that sense, agriculture is the main economic activity in rural areas. In what follows, the interaction between agriculture and tourism tends to broadly improve developing city' economies like ours.

It is important to emphasize that the owners of the farms have participated in the planning process for the development of local attractions, they have created good communication between the parties involved in the decision-making processes, although the participation of the different government entities is lacking to give greater importance to the development of agritourism.

As practical implications, this work serves as a bridge to understand the agritourism in this city in order to facilitate the policies and the integrated and Sustainable Tourism Planning of the destination and the care of the natural area, bringing benefits to the destination, the community, and the tourist.

Finally, the main limitation of the present study was the term "agritourism farms" are not defined in Ecuador law, therefore, it is a little difficult to provide a exact characterization of the farms. Further research is needed to discuss performance indicators of agritourism, such as: Sociodemographic aspects of tourist who visit these farms, the level of satisfaction of visitors, the economic impact of the agritourism in this city, types of government support in tourism activities and plans.

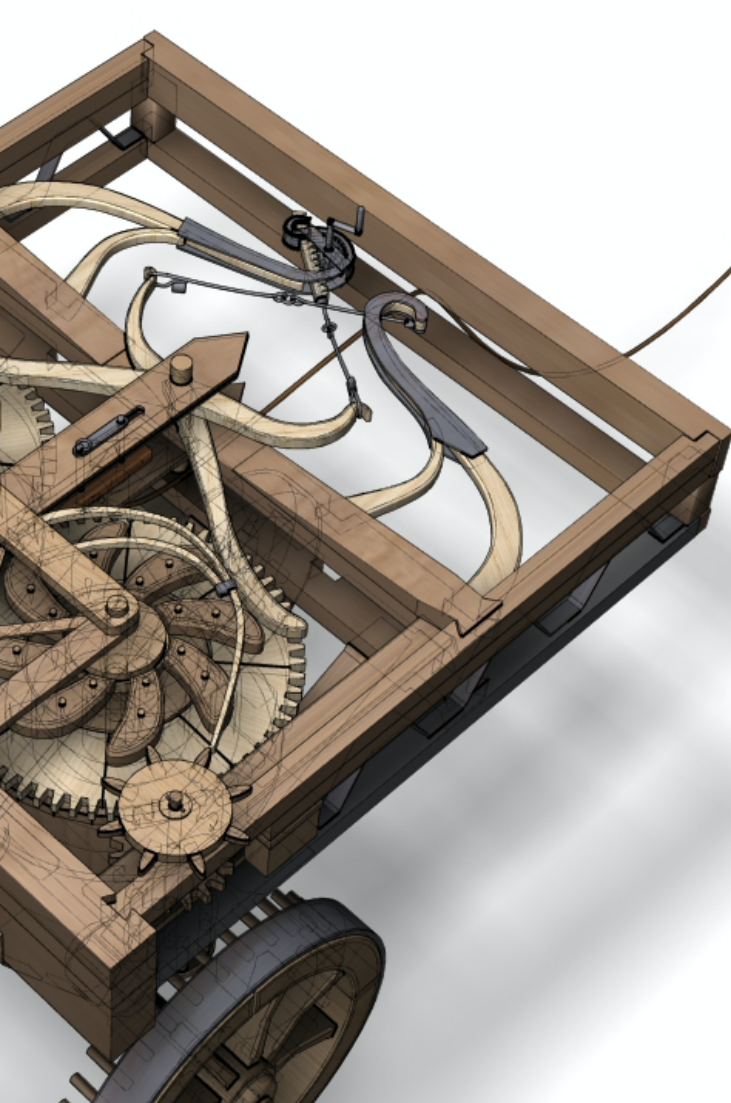
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