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Are all rural areas suitable for tourism? Developing a rural tourism suitability evaluation indicator model

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, rural tourism has evolved rapidly into a key strategy for promoting sustainable development in rural areas and has become a significant focus of tourism research. It contributes not only to rural revitalization and economic diversification but also to the preservation of natural and cultural resources. However, the existing evaluation systems for assessing rural tourism suitability remain fragmented and insufficient, often lacking scientific rigor, comprehensiveness, and practical applicability. To address this gap, this study develops a suitability evaluation model comprising five criteria and twenty-eight indicators, integrating both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Based on case studies of three rural tourist destinations in China at different stages of development, this study identifies environmental and infrastructure factors as the most influential determinants of rural tourism suitability. The findings reveal considerable variations in how destinations at different stages present and manage their suitability attributes, indicating the need for context-specific planning and development strategies. This paper enhances the theoretical understanding of rural tourism suitability assessment and proposes a systematic, scalable framework to inform future studies. By clarifying the key indicators and evaluation mechanisms, this study provides practical guidance for stakeholders across the public, private, and voluntary sectors engaged in rural tourism development and policymaking.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by developing a comprehensive, scientifically rigorous suitability evaluation model for rural tourism. It uses a novel methodology that integrates qualitative and quantitative criteria, offering a scalable framework for assessing tourism suitability. The paper's primary contribution is identifying key determinants, enhancing rural tourism planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the acceleration of urbanization, significant differences have emerged between urban and rural areas in multiple domains such as ecology, culture, and living environments (Yiqing, Li, Shu, & Wang, 2024). The increasing pressure of fast-paced work and life has made tranquility and proximity to nature in rural areas an ideal escape for urban residents, with rural tourism becoming a popular form of travel (Zhai et al., 2023; Zhu, Meng, Chai, & Zou, 2025). According to industry reports, the output value of China's rural tourism industry exceeded 900 billion yuan in 2023 (Fastdata, 2024). Faced with strong economic benefits, many rural areas have emerged to engage in tourism

development practices (Campón-Cerro, Hernández-Mogollón, & Alves, 2017). However, the rapid growth of rural tourism has also engendered several issues, including the destruction of rural landscapes, loss of local culture, and product homogenization (Torkington, Eimermann, Ribeiro, & Conceição, 2025). Owing to the lack of theoretical guidance, some rural tourism development projects have exhibited blind imitation and disorder (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2025). Therefore, clarifying the suitability and methods of rural tourism development is crucial for achieving sustainable rural development and enhancing the competitiveness of tourist destinations.

Although the question of whether all rural areas are suitable for tourism development has long attracted scholarly attention, existing studies have primarily focused on land use (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006), project development compatibility (Saxena & Ilbery, 2010), and spatial governance under the framework of sustainable development (Yang & Xu, 2022). In terms of evaluation tools, researchers have mostly constructed rural tourism suitability assessment systems based on static resource-oriented indicators, such as natural endowment, ecological conditions, and location accessibility (Ma, Shi, Li, Zhu, & Chen, 2023). However, such resource-based frameworks often overlook the crucial role of tourist perception in the tourism development process and lack quantitative tools that can dynamically integrate resource conditions with visitor experience. In recent years, an emerging body of literature has begun to recognize the central role of tourists in assessing suitability, emphasizing that perceived value, satisfaction, and experiential fit are vital to the long-term viability of tourism destinations (Yang & Xu, 2022; Zhai et al., 2023). Nevertheless, a lack of a theoretically grounded and methodologically integrated framework that unifies resource conditions and tourist perception remains. Thus, constructing a comprehensive evaluation model that integrates both perspectives has become a key scientific issue in promoting the sustainable development of rural tourism.

Accordingly, the present study proposes a comprehensive rural tourism suitability evaluation framework that systematically incorporates both resource development and tourist experience, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for sustainable rural tourism. The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it expands the theoretical boundary of suitability assessment by systematically introducing tourist perception and experience into a traditionally resource-driven framework, resulting in a model comprising five criteria and twenty-eight indicators. Second, it develops a scientifically robust and operationalizable evaluation tool by integrating qualitative analysis with quantitative methods, thereby addressing the subjectivity and fragmentation of existing indicator systems. Third, through empirical research on three rural tourism destinations in China at different stages of development, this study validates the applicability of the model and offers practical insights for local governments and tourism developers in planning, resource allocation, and management, ultimately enhancing the sustainability and attractiveness of rural tourism destinations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tourism Experience Theory

Tourism experience is a multidimensional concept that involves complex factors such as personal perception, place impressions, situational context, and individual characteristics (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). As a driving force behind the sustained growth of the tourism economy, creating exceptional tourism experiences has become a key objective for tourist destinations (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). Because of the diversity of tourists, their needs vary, leading to differences in expectations and pursuits of tourism experiences (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). Based on tourists' needs, Cohen (2013) classifies tourism experiences into five categories: entertainment and recreation, escape and relaxation, physical and mental experience, behavioral experience, and life existence. He argues that these five types of experiences represent different dimensions of needs, including health recovery, escaping from the hustle and bustle of daily life, seeking aesthetic pleasure, exploring lifestyle diversity, and embracing exotic cultures. This classification offers an important perspective for understanding the diversity of tourism experiences.

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and tourism function theory, Pine and Gilmore (2011) categorize tourist experiences into levels such as enjoying nature, relieving stress, acquiring knowledge, value sharing, and creating pleasure, highlighting the progressive relationship among these levels. Specifically, enjoying nature and relieving stress belong to lower-level experiences, while acquiring knowledge, value sharing, and creating pleasure represent higher-level tourism experiences (Lai, Liu, & Lu, 2021). However, the actual situation is more complex, as these experience dimensions are not entirely independent but instead interweave and overlap. For instance, the experience of enjoying nature is often accompanied by the acquisition of knowledge, while that of creating pleasure may also involve elements of value sharing (Lai et al., 2021).

With its continuous development, tourism experience theory has been widely applied in the field of rural tourism, including in areas such as rural tourism visitor satisfaction (Devesa, Laguna, & Palacios, 2010) and perceived value (Komppula, 2005). In fact, tourism experience, as a core dimension of tourist activities, plays an important theoretical role in rural tourism suitability evaluation and optimization decisions. However, the existing literature lacks sufficient integration of tourism experience elements in the construction of rural tourism suitability indicators. Therefore, this study, based on tourism experience theory, presents a construct of a rural tourism suitability evaluation indicator model to provide theoretical support for the sustainable development of rural tourism.

2.2. Rural Tourism Suitability

With the advancement of urban–rural integration, rural areas are undergoing profound social, economic, and cultural transformations (Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). Traditional rural development models are being deconstructed, and rural spatial structures and forms have undergone significant changes. Against this backdrop, the future development of rural areas has encountered new opportunities, especially in China, where measures such as the reintegration of existing rural settlements, village relocation, remediation of hollow villages, and improvements in rural living environments (Bramwell, 1994) have actively promoted the rural revitalization strategy (Geng, Liu, & Chen, 2023). In his study of the human living environment, Smith (1969) proposes that livability should include three aspects: first, the cleanliness of the public health environment; second, the beauty and comfort of the living environment; and third, the harmony and aesthetic appeal of historical buildings and the natural environment. Only when these three aspects are simultaneously realized can an environment be considered livable.

In fact, with improvements in rural living environments, many clean and beautiful villages have gradually developed into attractive rural tourism destinations (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). Although some rural areas have the potential to develop rural tourism (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Yang & Xu, 2022; Zhu et al., 2025), existing academic research has not sufficiently explored issues related to rural tourism suitability, resulting in a lack of systematic advancement in this field and limiting the expansion of theoretical knowledge and the deepening of practical applications. Rural tourism relies on a wide range of public and private natural and cultural resources, relevant infrastructure and interpretative facilities, as well as accommodations, food, beverages, and goods (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). Identifying rural areas suitable for tourism development will provide a scientific basis for rural tourism planning and practice.

2.3. Rural Tourism Suitability Evaluation

With the ongoing progress of urbanization, rural areas have gradually become important tourist destinations, and rural tourism has thus evolved into a key spatial medium for people's return to nature in modern society (Fleischer & Tchetchik, 2005). In the development of rural tourism, rural tourism destinations, as a core component, require a comprehensive evaluation of their suitability, which is not only a fundamental basis for rural tourism development and sustainable growth but also a key area of increasing academic interest (Leedon, L'Espoir Decosta, Buttriss, & Lu, 2021; Xia, Zhang, & Zhang, 2025). Early research has mainly focused on exploring the potential for rural tourism development, with scholars conducting qualitative evaluations from multiple dimensions, such as cost–benefit,

economic development, and population, providing theoretical support for the feasibility of rural tourism destinations (Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Medojevic, Milosavljevic, & Punisic, 2011). However, as the scale of rural tourism continues to expand, its complexity has gradually increased, and more stakeholders have become involved (Yang & Xu, 2022; Yiqing et al., 2024). Consequently, academic research on rural tourism suitability evaluation has shifted from qualitative to quantitative analysis, with research perspectives and methods becoming more diverse.

Grounded in a diversified research framework, scholars have proposed multidimensional rural tourism suitability evaluation indicator models from different perspectives. For example, from a cultural viewpoint, scholars have developed an evaluation indicator model for rural tourism project development that includes aspects such as ethics, inclusiveness, marketing, and folk arts (Briedenhann, 2009). From the perspective of rurality, a sustainable rural tourism development model has been proposed, focusing on core dimensions such as rural resource aggregation, locational advantages, and infrastructure (Maksin, 2012). Based on government management, some studies have constructed an evaluation indicator model for rural tourism development encompassing four dimensions: economic, sociocultural, environmental, and institutional (Hisyam, 2013). Moreover, as tourists have gradually become the main market participants in rural tourism, some scholars have conducted systematic evaluations of rural tourism service quality from a touristic perspective. For instance, based on the perceived service quality model, researchers have empirically analyzed service quality in areas such as online booking systems, local residents' attitudes, tourism services, and infrastructure development (Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000). Additionally, a rural tourism service quality evaluation indicator model has been developed based on such dimensions as convenience facilities, core attraction experiences, cleanliness, tourism services, safety environment, and pricing (Rajaratnam, Munikrishnan, Sharif, & Nair, 2014).

However, as a complex integrated system, the suitability of rural tourism destinations is influenced not only by hard factors, such as natural resources and infrastructure but also by tourist experience (Torkington et al., 2025). Existing research has mainly focused on analyses from a single perspective (Briedenhann, 2009; Maksin, 2012; Rajaratnam et al., 2014), with few scholars comprehensively considering the multidimensional factors of rural tourism development and tourist experiences, constructing a suitability evaluation indicator model that integrates rural tourism development potential, tourist demand, and tourism experience has become an important issue that needs to be addressed.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Case Study Area

This study focuses on three representative rural tourism destinations in China, each reflecting a different model and stage of development (Figure 1). Nestled in the Yellow Mountains of China's Anhui Province, Feicui Valley was a poor and underdeveloped village throughout the early 1980s, with most residents depending on forestry and tea cultivation to subsist. In 1985, the village began developing rural tourism. Just two years later, in a bold move, villagers voluntarily pooled their individually contracted mountain land to establish the country's first farmer-run tourism company a grassroots experiment in collective entrepreneurship. Over the next three decades, Feicui Valley steadily transformed itself into one of China's most established rural tourism destinations. It has since earned more than a dozen national and international honors, including the UN Habitat Award and China's "Best New Village in Rural Tourism" prize.

Shuimo Tingxi, located in Jing County, Anhui Province, is a model of how rural landscapes can be reimagined through sustainable tourism. In 2009, Tingxi Township launched the Shuimo Tingxi Scenic Area, calling for external investment. Over the next 10 years, the area was developed with a focus on ecology, natural charm, and low-carbon principles. By blending active and tranquil experiences, it was transformed into an immersive, full-area rural destination branded around the idea of "Shuimo Energy." Today, it holds a national 4A status and is recognized as a

leading demonstration site for agritourism and rural leisure in China, typifying a standout example of tourism-driven countryside renewal.

Lujia Village is situated in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province a city often hailed as China's leading destination for rural tourism. Prior to 2011, the village was considered backward and neglected, plagued by poor infrastructure, limited transportation, and an economic downturn. It was even described as a "hollow village" due to depopulation and decay. In 2013, Lujia embarked on a path of revitalization by joining a provincial initiative to develop model "Beautiful Villages," which initiated its transformation through rural tourism. Today, it is recognized as one of China's first pilot sites for integrated rural development and a national model for the "Beautiful Countryside" program.

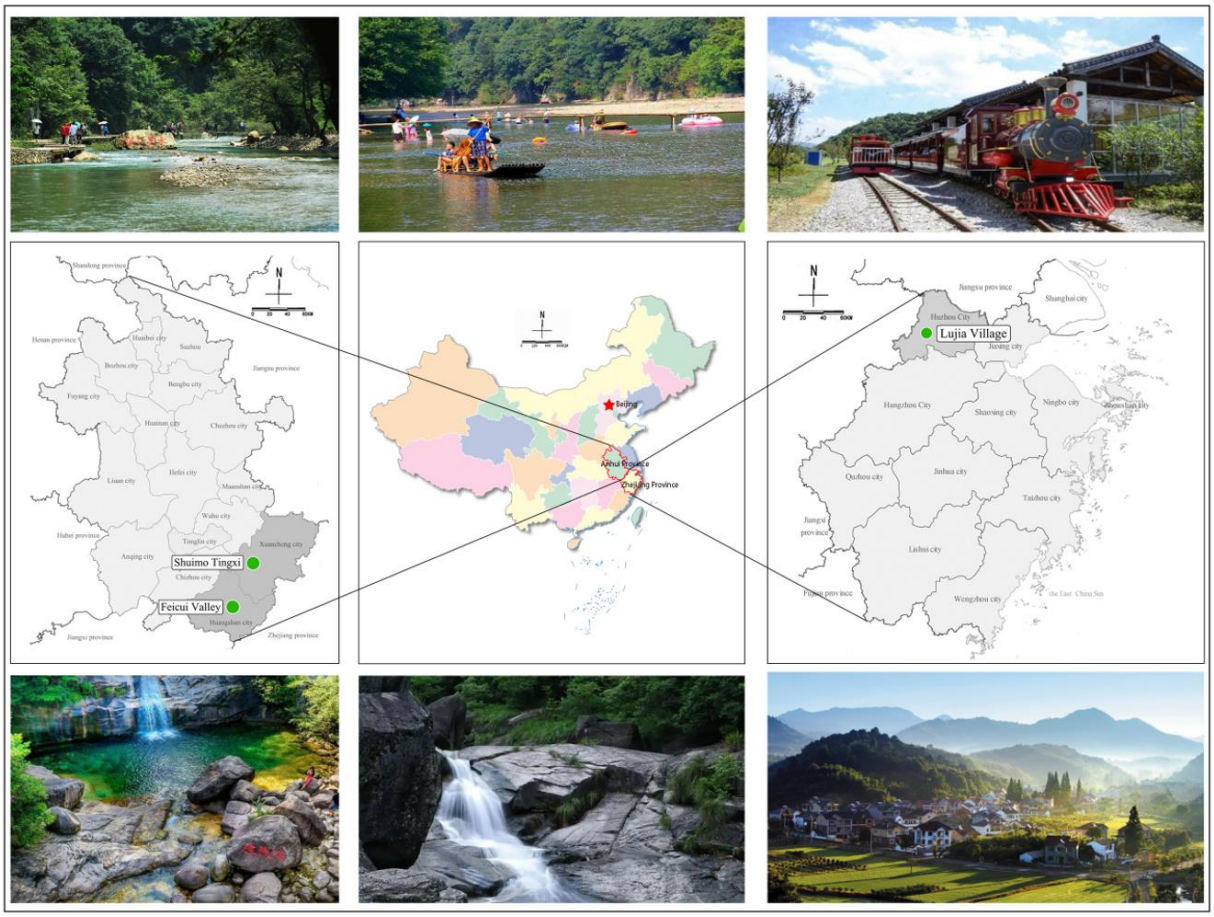

Figure 1. Case study area.

3.2. Research Methods and Data Sources

Based on Papadas, Avlonitis, and Carrigan (2017) suggestions, the scale development process of the present study comprises four stages. The first stage involves the creation of the initial item pool. The theoretical framework of rural tourism suitability is first constructed, which theoretically derives the dimensions of the scale. Relevant indicators are then selected based on national policy documents on rural tourism, tourism standards, and rural tourism development reports issued by the government. The relevant indicators are subsequently expanded through a literature review. A Delphi survey is then conducted, inviting 12 rural tourism experts to evaluate the relevance and applicability of the initial item pool.

The second stage involves the pre-testing of measurement indicators. After the preliminary list of indicators was completed in October 2024, a preliminary survey was conducted, involving the distribution of 90 questionnaires. Two indicators were removed due to issues related to collinearity, reliability, and validity.

The third stage involves the purification of the indicator system. The field survey was conducted in two phases, with 800 questionnaires distributed in November and December 2024 to three rural tourism destinations. Notably, 649 valid visitor questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 81.1%. Of these, 223 valid responses were from Feicui Valley, 209 from Shuimo Tingxi, and 217 from Lujia Village. The indicator system was refined using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and its reliability was assessed via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The validity of the system was evaluated using structural equation modeling.

The fourth stage covers the field validation of the indicator system. To facilitate comparative studies of the various case sites, the weightings of the rural tourism suitability indicator system were calculated. The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was first used to evaluate the relative importance of each indicator within the hierarchical framework, including goals, sub-goals, standards, and constraints. These comparisons were used to construct a judgment matrix, from which the weight coefficients were calculated. Twelve rural tourism experts were invited to assess the relative importance of each factor through pairwise comparisons. The final matrix reached the consistency threshold (CR < 0.1), and the final weights were determined accordingly (Table 3). As the weight distribution in the AHP may involve some subjectivity, this study also employs principal component analysis (PCA) to generate a more objective set of weights using data from the formal survey and SPSS software. This process included data standardization, as well as the construction of the correlation matrix and the calculation of eigenvalues, eigenvectors, contribution rates, and component loadings. Based on the quasi-principal component method, the first principal component was used as the basis for determining the objective weights (Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016) (Table 3).

Finally, the comprehensive evaluation result is calculated by averaging the "Method 1 Weights" and "Method 2 Weights" to determine the final weights of this study. The rural tourism suitability evaluation system used in this study classifies indicators under five key criteria. Both expert and tourist evaluations are gathered using a Likert scale, with ratings ranging from "very unimportant" to "very important." To better reflect the visitors' perspectives in the overall evaluation and to present the results more clearly, tourist experience is rated on a five-point scale encompassing "very poor," "poor," "average," "good," and "excellent," with corresponding scores of 20, 40, 60, 80, and 100, respectively. This scoring system is designed to simplify the calculation process for subsequent analyses (Wang et al., 2021). Equation 1 presents the formula for evaluating tourism suitability at a given rural destination.

$$M = \sum_{i=1}^{n} F_i Q_i \qquad (i = 1,2,\ldots,n) \qquad (1)$$

where M represents the tourism suitability score for a specific rural tourism destination; variable i refers to the index number for a given tourism suitability factor; n is the total number of evaluation indicators, which is 28 in this study; F_i is the overall weight assigned to the *i-th* factor at the destination (this weight is calculated as the average of those derived from both the AHP and PCA); and Q_i is the score assigned to the *i-th* factor at the rural tourism destination.

4. EVALUATION INDICATOR SYSTEM AND MODEL CONSTRUCTION

4.1. Sources of the Indicator System

As the experience economy takes hold, traditional sightseeing tours no longer satisfy the needs of today's travelers. An increasing number of people are seeking deeper and more immersive experiences during their trips whether through entertainment, escape, aesthetics, education, or emotional connection (Chang, 2018). A positive tourist experience is crucial to the sustainable development of rural tourism, serving as both the market foundation and a key driving factor. Rural tourism entails a complex interaction between governments, rural residents, businesses, and tourists, shaped by specific time and place conditions. This ongoing negotiation process fuels the creation and evolution of rural tourism suitability evaluations. The logic behind these evaluations is rooted in the efforts of governments, businesses, and rural residents to leverage the unique resources of the countryside. By developing infrastructure, improving service quality, and fostering an environment that encourages tourism, they aim to offer tourists enriching experiences. These experiences consequently inspire tourists to provide feedback,

completing a cycle in which emotional satisfaction is returned to the government, businesses, and rural residents (Su, 2011). The interactions between all the parties involved form the framework for evaluating rural tourism suitability (Figure 2), with the selection of specific indicators reflecting the system's multiple components.

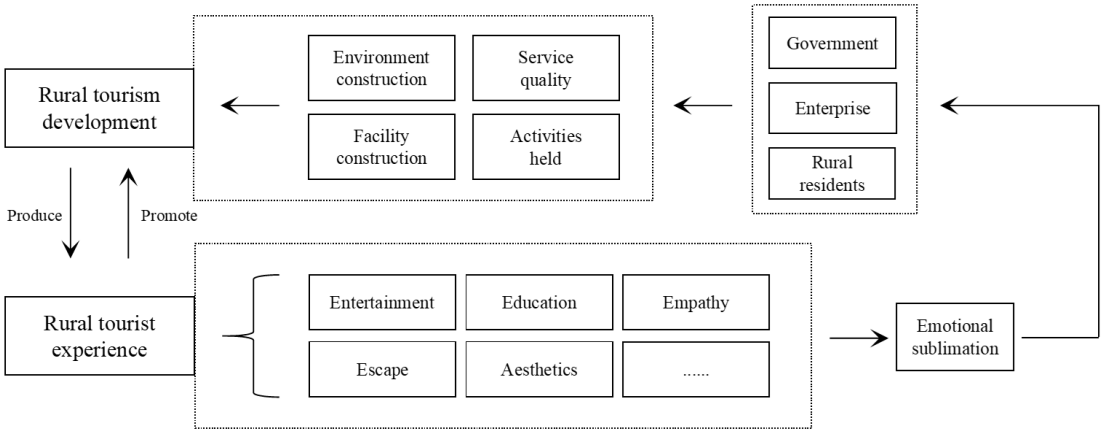

Figure 2. Framework diagram of a rural tourism suitability system

The development of a rural tourism suitability evaluation system should adhere to principles of scientific accuracy, system coherence, guidance, hierarchical structure, and practicality. Considering the unique features of rural tourism, the system should provide an objective and comprehensive reflection of the current state of resources at rural tourism destinations as well as their potential for tourism suitability. Simultaneously, it should consider the specific needs and demands of tourists to better support the sustainable growth of rural tourism. Building on traditional rural tourism index systems, this study adopts a micro-level approach, viewing rural destinations as comprising various spatial elements such as the natural and cultural environment, infrastructure, and local customs. These elements all fall under the category of tourism resources in the context of tourism studies. Therefore, when constructing the evaluation model, references are made to key standards such as the "Tourism Resource Classification, Survey, and Research" (GB/T18972-2003), the "Classification and Evaluation of Tourist Area Quality Levels" (GB/T17775-2009), the "Rural Tourism Demonstration Village Evaluation Standards" (DB51/T1436-2012), and the "Rural Tourism Area Service Standards" (DB/T1619-2015). On a broader scale, rural tourism destinations share many similarities with beautiful rural areas, particularly in terms of facilities, location, management models, and operational organization. As such, the "Beautiful Countryside Construction Guide" (GB/T32000-2015) is also referenced in selecting indicators, drawing on national guidelines for scenic spots, forest parks, and other rural tourism areas in spheres such as the environment, facilities, and activities. From the perspective of tourist experience, the impact of these experiences is a key factor in determining the suitability of a rural destination. Therefore, the evaluation system incorporates aspects of tourism experience theory, including entertainment, education, escape, aesthetics, and empathy (B5).

4.2. Indicator System Selection

Following these principles, an initial set of rural tourism suitability evaluation indicators was developed, comprising three levels: goals, criteria, and indicators. After consulting with experts, such as university professors, government officials, and rural managers, indicators that were difficult to apply or lacked expert consensus were removed. In October 2024, a preliminary survey was conducted at Dapu Village, a national A-level tourist attraction in Anhui, to test the rural tourism suitability evaluation indicators. A total of 90 questionnaires were distributed, and 70 valid responses were collected. The data from this pre-survey were then analyzed using SPSS 22.0, with Pearson correlation analysis employed to refine the indicator set. Indicators with high correlation, which contained redundant

information or caused interference, were excluded. Based on the results, indicators with a correlation coefficient above 0.8 were discarded. Among the removed indicators were restroom sanitation and dining facility cleanliness.

4.3. Indicator System Finalization

Exploratory factor analysis. This study employs factor analysis to determine and validate the indicator system. The total dataset is divided into two groups (N1 = 320, N2 = 329): one group uses SPSS 22.0 for EFA, while the other utilizes AMOS 23.0 for CFA (Kyriazos, 2018). Initially, the sample's reliability and validity were tested using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO value was found to be 0.924, with Bartlett's test yielding a result of 11126.24 and a p-value of 0, indicating that the sample was suitable for factor analysis. Factor analysis was then conducted using SPSS 22.0, with a factor loading threshold of 0.5 used as the criterion for selecting indicators (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2024). Indicators with factor loadings below 0.5, such as air quality level, emotional enhancement, and souvenirs, were removed. A second round of factor analysis was performed on the sample, followed by Kaiser normalization and maximum orthogonal rotation. The resulting measurement indicators were consolidated into five dimensions, with a cumulative variance contribution rate of 72.32%, exceeding the minimum cumulative variance contribution rate of 60%, thus indicating a high level of explanatory power (Table 1). After factor analysis, the comprehensive evaluation indicator system is categorized into five subsystems: environmental, facility, service, activity, and emotional factors, totaling 28 indicator factors (all positive indicators). These factors maintain consistency at the target layer. From the perspective of tourist experience, each subsystem has its own dimensional structure, with differing standards and angles for the observed indicators under each subsystem, low interference, and strong operability. This can be represented as A = (B1, B2, B3, B4, B5), with the specific evaluation model (Table 1) shown.

Table 1. EFA results for the rural tourism suitability evaluation indicators (N1 = 320).

Measurement dimension	Observed indicator	Factor loadings	Variance (%)	Cumulative variance (%)
B_1 environmental	Natural scenery C_1	0.605	16.347	16.347
	Architectural Character C_2	0.635		
	Cleanliness C_3	0.637		
	Local friendliness C_4	0.714		
	Safety C_5	0.698		
B_2 infrastructure	Transportation access C_6	0.712	15.027	31.374
	Connectivity C_7	0.707		
	Lodging comfort C_8	0.685		
	Waste disposal C_9	0.701		
	Visitor information C_{10}	0.610		
	Signage C_{11}	0.614		
	Parking C_{12}	0.708		
B_3 service	Hospitality C_{13}	0.755	14.333	45.706
	Complaint response C_{14}	0.751		
	Local food quality C_{15}	0.715		
	Payment options C_{16}	0.762		
	Online services C_{17}	0.767		
	Tour guide quality C_{18}	0.743		
B_4 activities	Range of activities C_{19}	0.759	13.827	59.533
	Uniqueness C_{20}	0.727		
	Environmental fit C_{21}	0.738		
	Cultural integration C_{22}	0.778		
	Visitor engagement C_{23}	0.725		
B_5 emotional	Peace and escape C_{24}	0.695	12.784	72.317
	Enjoyment C_{25}	0.715		
	Emotional relief C_{26}	0.764		
	Aesthetic pleasure C_{27}	0.698		
	Learning C_{28}	0.693		

Confirmatory factor analysis. Building upon the EFA, AMOS 23.0 was employed to establish a first-order confirmatory model for the rural tourism indicator measurement dimensions. The model was then fitted and refined using another sample dataset. Given the large sample size, the model fit is evaluated based on overall and internal structural indices (Byrne, 2001). The results indicate that in terms of overall fit, the absolute fit indices are as follows: RMSEA = 0.066, RMR = 0.020, and GFI = 0.855, all meeting acceptable standards. The relative fit indices include NFI = 0.898, TLI = 0.927, CFI = 0.937, and IFI = 0.937, all reaching the reasonable fit threshold. The parsimony fit indices are PGFI = 0.685, PNFI = 0.772, and PCFI = 0.806, all greater than 0.5, indicating an excellent fit (Table 2).

Table 2. Fit test of measurement model (N_2 = 329).

Fit index	RMSEA	GFI	NFI	TLI	CFI	IFI	PGFI	PCFI
Recommended value	< 0.08	≥ 0.80	≥ 0.80	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	≥ 0.90	> 0.5	> 0.5
Actual value	0.066	0.855	0.898	0.927	0.937	0.937	0.685	0.806

Regarding the internal structure fit of the model, the factor loadings (standardized path coefficients) for the observed variables range between 0.50 and 0.90 (Figure 2), with 24 indicator loadings exceeding 0.70. Furthermore, the item reliabilities show that 23 indicators have reliabilities greater than 0.5. A p-value of 0 indicates that all parameters are statistically significant. In summary, the model's fit indices are reasonable, and the model itself is considered well-validated and ideal (Figure 3). The final factors can be found in Appendix A.

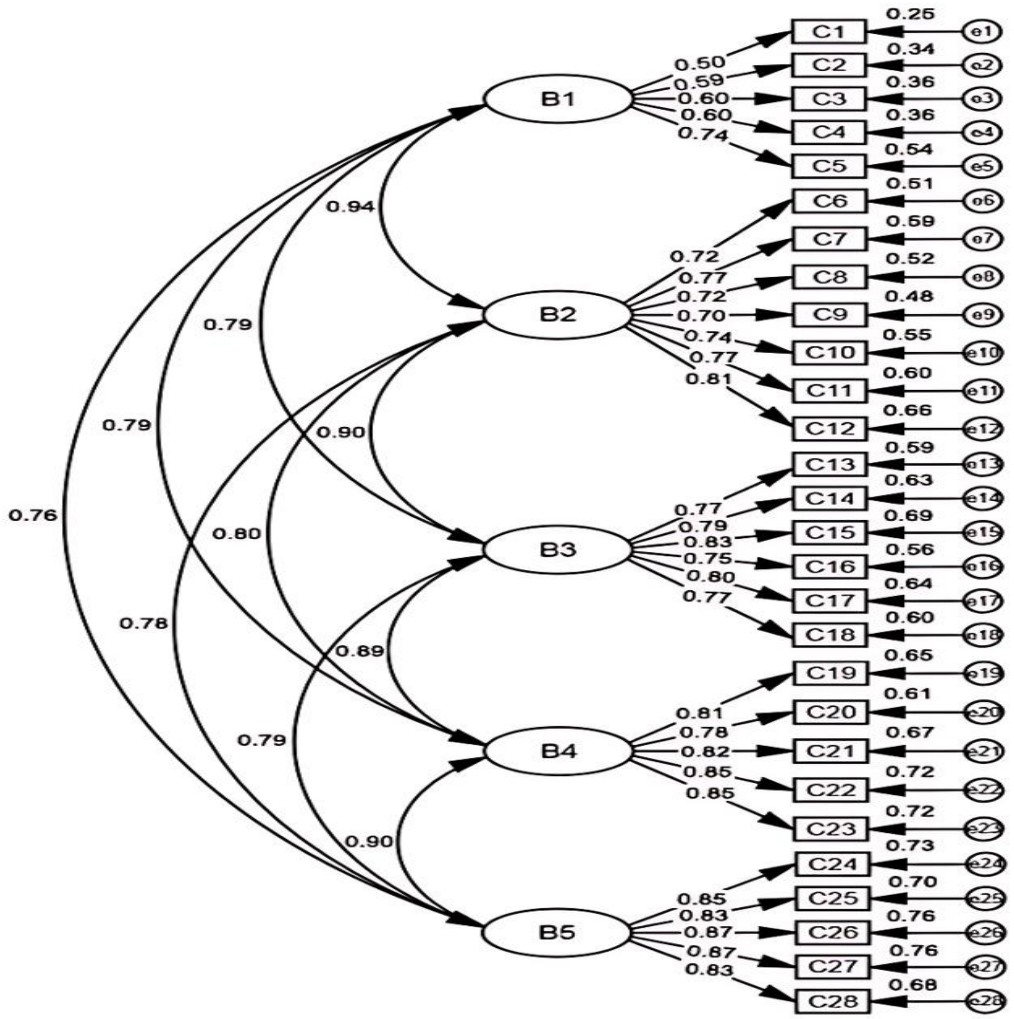

Figure 3. CFA results for the rural tourism suitability evaluation indicators (N_2 = 329).

5. RURAL TOURISM SUITABILITY EVALUATION MODEL MEASUREMENT

Based on the survey findings, expert consultations were conducted, and further revisions were made. Each rural tourism destination was assessed using a weighted scoring method derived from previously outlined indicator factors. After collecting and averaging the scores for each indicator, the final evaluation results were calculated using Equation 1, allowing for a comparative analysis of tourists' perceptions of the suitability of the three destinations for rural tourism. Drawing on existing research and adjusted from the perspective of tourist experience, the evaluation was divided into four levels: destinations scoring 80 or above were considered "highly suitable for tourism"; scores between 70 and 79 indicated "moderately suitable"; scores between 60 and 69 were "somewhat suitable"; and scores below 60 were deemed "unsuitable for tourism" (Wang, Cheng, & Zhong, 2012).

Table 3. Weight distribution of indicators and corresponding scores of three rural tourism destinations.

Measure dimensions	Observing indicators	Weight (Method 1)	Weight (Method 2)	Combined weight	Shuimo Tingxi	Feicui Valley	Lujia Village
B_1 environmental (0.3586/0.1722/0.2654)	Natural scenery C_1	0.1350	0.0312	0.0831	83.73	87.2	72.94
	Architectural character C_2	0.1032	0.0301	0.0667	72.45	82.27	70.76
	Cleanliness C_3	0.0373	0.0324	0.0349	74.56	80.61	73.67
	Local friendliness C_4	0.0627	0.0335	0.0481	78.18	80.49	76.74
	Safety C_5	0.0204	0.0450	0.0327	74.48	79.6	78.33
B_2 infrastructure (0.2787/0.1905/0.2346)	Transportation access C_6	0.0571	0.0205	0.0388	70.35	77.28	81.56
	Connectivity C_7	0.0590	0.0234	0.0412	72.57	76.05	79.43
	Lodging comfort C_8	0.0632	0.0489	0.0561	75.89	82.6	77.78
	Waste disposal C_9	0.0525	0.0234	0.0380	74.67	77.16	79.67
	Visitor information C_{10}	0.0118	0.0204	0.0161	70.93	80.78	75.91
	Signage C_{11}	0.0141	0.0220	0.0181	72.4	78.18	79.65
	Parking C_{12}	0.0210	0.0319	0.0265	73.87	78.08	81.45
B_3 service (0.1503/0.1543/0.1523)	Hospitality C_{13}	0.0288	0.0315	0.0302	75.54	86.51	80.11
	Complaint response C_{14}	0.0395	0.0320	0.0358	74.52	87.81	83.56
	Local food quality C_{15}	0.0342	0.0468	0.0405	80.43	89.57	82.13
	Payment options C_{16}	0.0249	0.0124	0.0187	75.40	81.52	85.61
	Online services C_{17}	0.0129	0.0197	0.0163	75.07	82.6	86.81
	Tour guide quality C_{18}	0.0100	0.0119	0.0110	70.91	80.65	81.26
B_4 activities (0.1404/0.2191/0.1975)	Range of activities C_{19}	0.0318	0.0420	0.0369	82.48	70.74	83.93
	Uniqueness C_{20}	0.0328	0.0437	0.0383	85.67	71.54	87.52
	Environmental fit C_{21}	0.0305	0.0443	0.0374	83.28	75.18	85.46
	Cultural integration C_{22}	0.0232	0.0432	0.0332	81.94	70.97	88.36
	Visitor engagement C_{23}	0.0221	0.0459	0.0340	84.89	72.63	89.75
B_5 emotional (0.072/0.2638/0.1679)	Peace and escape C_{24}	0.0146	0.0528	0.0337	78.43	80.58	78.7
	Enjoyment C_{25}	0.0144	0.0531	0.0338	79.05	76.67	80.34
	Emotional relief C_{26}	0.0143	0.0510	0.0327	78.84	82.43	79.64
	Aesthetic pleasure C_{27}	0.0145	0.0546	0.0346	82.67	77.64	81.48
	Learning C_{28}	0.0142	0.0523	0.0333	76.97	72.89	82.75

According to the data in Table 3, the rankings of the three destinations, from highest to lowest, were Lujia Village ("Highly suitable"), Feicui Valley ("Moderately suitable"), and Shuimo Tingxi ("Moderately suitable"). Overall, the scores show clear differences in tourists' ratings of the five tourism suitability dimensions at each site. At

Shuimo Tingxi, the importance of each factor declined in the following order: environment (B1, 20.59), infrastructure (B2, 17.22), activities (B4, 15.05), emotional (B5, 13.32), and services (B3, 11.62). Feicui Valley followed a slightly different pattern: environment (B1, 22.02), infrastructure (B2, 18.48), services (B3, 13.14), emotional (B5, 13.12), and activities (B4, 12.99). Lujia Village exhibited the following descending pattern: environment (B1, 19.60), infrastructure (B2, 18.65), activities (B4, 15.63), emotional (B5, 13.55), and services (B3, 12.65). These patterns suggest that the five dimensions are closely interconnected and work together to shape a destination's suitability for rural tourism. Tourists generally had stronger impressions of the environmental and infrastructure aspects, which consistently ranked among the top two scoring dimensions across all three locations. This highlights the central role that these two factors play in shaping overall tourism suitability. However, there were noticeable differences across the destinations in terms of scores for services, activities, and emotional appeal; for example, service quality stood out in Feicui Valley, which is more developed. Conversely, Lujia Village and Shuimo Tingxi, though newer, stood out for their engaging activities and distinctive emotional experiences.

Each destination is at a different stage of development, which explains some of the variations in scores. Lujia Village, despite being the newest, received the highest overall rating. It shares a similar scoring pattern with Shuimo Tingxi both offer attractive tourism activities but differs significantly in infrastructure and service. Located in Huzhou, Zhejiang, Lujia Village benefits from strong economic conditions, policy support, and well-funded, professionally managed development, making its infrastructure and public services more advanced than those in Shuimo Tingxi, which is located in the less-developed southern Anhui region. The differences between Lujia Village and Feicui Valley primarily lie in environmental and activity factors. Feicui Valley enjoys a pristine natural setting at the base of Mount Huangshan; however, its traditional development model lacks engaging, hands-on rural tourism activities. Meanwhile, the contrast between Feicui Valley and Shuimo Tingxi is most evident in infrastructure and service the former's more mature development and high-quality service enhance the tourist experience. In summary, while environmental and infrastructure factors form the foundation of rural tourism suitability, activities and services have become key differentiators. Emotional appeal varies less across destinations but still captures the subtle, real-time feelings of tourists during their visits, offering insight into each site's development level and, therefore, remains a valuable part of the overall evaluation (Table 4).

Table 4. Weighted scores of first-level indicators in three rural tourism destinations.

Name	Environmental (B_1)	Infrastructure (B_2)	Service (B_3)	Activities (B_4)	Emotional (B_5)	Weighted total score
Shuimo Tingxi	20.59	17.22	11.62	15.05	13.32	77.80
Feicui Valley	22.02	18.48	13.14	12.99	13.12	79.75
Lujia Village	19.60	18.65	12.65	15.63	13.55	80.08

6. CONCLUSION

This study aims to develop and validate a tourism suitability evaluation indicator model for rural tourism. Based on the research findings of previous scholars and through a rigorous multistage scale development process, we construct a tourism suitability evaluation indicator model that includes five criterion layers (Environment, Infrastructure, Service, Activities, and Emotional Experience) and twenty-eight indicator factors. By applying this model and assigning weights to each indicator, we conduct an empirical study on the tourism suitability of three typical rural tourism destinations in China. The results show that, from the perspective of visitor experience, Lujia Village is the most suitable for rural tourism development, followed by Feicui Valley and Shuimo Tingxi, which are relatively suitable for rural tourism. The evaluation results are largely consistent with the development levels of rural tourism in these three areas, indicating that the evaluation indicators developed in this study are scientifically sound and applicable.

It is noteworthy that our study finds significant differences in the tourism suitability attributes presented to visitors by rural tourism destinations at different stages of development. On the one hand, for traditional rural tourism destinations with a longer development history and relative maturity, such as Feicui Valley, the beautiful natural environment and well-established facilities and services provide a good emotional experience for visitors. However, owing to the relatively single development model and the lack of compelling activities, there is a notable deficiency in activity-related factors. On the other hand, rural tourism destinations with shorter development periods, such as Lujia Village and Shuimo Tingxi, offer a good environment and infrastructure, along with a variety of activities, providing a deeper emotional experience for visitors. However, because of their shorter development time, public service levels are relatively low and service quality needs improvement. Specifically, Feicui Valley is limited in terms of activity diversity, while Lujia Village and Shuimo Tingxi have relatively poor service quality. This suggests that while these rural tourism destinations place significant emphasis on environmental and infrastructure factors, the exploration of activity and service factors is insufficient. Consequently, there is an urgent need to reorganize and optimize the tourism attributes of these destinations to enhance their overall appeal.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1. Theoretical Contributions

First, this study contributes to the field of rural tourism suitability evaluation. Previous research has mainly focused on constructing rural tourism development evaluation models from the perspectives of the government, residents, and others, often emphasizing the hardware development dimensions of rural tourism, such as infrastructure and policy support (Chen, Clarke, & Hracs, 2022) while overlooking the core experiences of tourists in rural tourism (Gocer, Boyacioglu, Karahan, & Shrestha, 2024). By combining the dual perspectives of rural tourism development and tourist experience, this study systematically integrates development indicators including environmental carrying capacity, service facilities, and cultural heritage with experiential dimensions such as sensory experience and emotional interaction. A multilevel evaluation system with 28 core indicators is constructed. This model effectively addresses issues in traditional evaluations, such as the separation of physical environment and emotional experience and the homogenization of evaluation dimensions, thereby providing a diagnostic tool for rural tourism destination upgrades that is both scientifically sound and practical.

Second, this study promotes the deepening and expansion of tourism experience theory in the rural context. The existing literature on the analysis of tourism service environments often focuses on a single dimension and fails to fully reveal the synergistic effects of factors such as culture, facilities, and the natural environment (Fytopoulou, Tampakis, Galatsidas, Karasmanaki, & Tsantopoulos, 2021). By constructing an evaluation model that includes five dimensions environment, facilities, services, activities, and emotions this study systematically demonstrates, for the first time, the key impact of the combined effects of multiple factors on tourist experience. This theoretical framework not only fills the gap in stakeholder research regarding the tourist perspective (Cáceres-Feria, Hernández-Ramírez, & Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2021; Dinis, Simões, Cruz, & Teodoro, 2019; Liu, Dou, Li, & Cai, 2020; Matilainen & Lähdesmäki, 2014) but also provides a new reference for research on rural tourism experience.

7.2. Managerial Implications

By constructing a rural tourism suitability evaluation indicator system, this study provides valuable references for managers of rural tourism destinations.

First, rural tourism development should not only focus on enhancing the environment and facilities but also consider the deep cultural connotations carried by rural areas, including the integration of "production," "life," and "emotion." These connotations form the unique charm of rural areas (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Peixeira Marques, & Lima, 2012) and provide tourists with a richer and more comprehensive travel experience (Ruiz-Ballesteros & González-Portillo, 2025; Teng, Wu, & Wang, 2022). Therefore, rural tourism destinations should systematically

reorganize and optimize their suitability attributes, while paying attention to the innovative integration of cultural heritage and tourism activities, and aim to not only achieve the sustainable development of rural tourism but also enhance its overall appeal.

Second, our study emphasizes the importance of tourist experience. We recommend that destination managers, when planning and developing rural tourism, not only focus on the beautiful natural environment, well-established infrastructure, high-quality services, and a variety of activities but also work to enhance the overall experience of tourists during their trips. Specifically, there should be a focus on the organic integration of nature and culture as well as the deep merging of reality and emotion to enhance tourists' emotional value and cultural identity. Furthermore, a certain degree of demand deviation exists between tourists' needs for rural tourism and the concept of "rurality" mentioned in academic research (Qian, He, & Smith, 2025). In particular, tourists are not only duly concerned with the superiority of the rural environment but also increasingly demanding in terms of activity design and emotional experiences. Therefore, the development of rural tourism should pay more attention to the emotional needs of tourists, thereby enhancing their sense of participation and belonging, while facilitating the diversification and personalization of rural tourism development.

7.3. Limitations and Future Research

The rural tourism suitability evaluation indicator model established in this study considers aspects such as the environment, facilities, services, activities, and emotions, incorporating the strengths of other tourism resource evaluation indicators. However, rural tourism is a specific and complex system (Chen et al., 2022), and the factors involved in suitability evaluation and the weighting of indicator factors will evolve as the rural tourism industry develops. Conceptualizing methods to select and determine indicator factors more scientifically, as well as dividing and defining suitability standards for rural tourism destinations, still require further research and improvement.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study involved minimal risk and adhered to ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of Anhui Normal University, China. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality. Ethical approval was provided by the first author's institution.
Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
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Appendix A. Analysis of the rural tourism suitability evaluation indicators.

Measure dimensions	Observing indicators	Indicator description
B_1 environment	Natural scenery C_1	How pleasant and inviting the local landscape is, including climate, terrain, greenery, and water features.
	Architectural Character C_2	The extent to which traditional rural architecture is preserved and showcased.
	Cleanliness C_3	General hygiene standards in streets, toilets, and dining areas.
	Local friendliness C_4	How welcoming and approachable local residents are to visitors.
	Safety C_5	Perceived safety, including the presence of security personnel and the risk level of tourist activities.
B_2 infrastructure	Transportation access C_6	How easy it is to reach the village via road or other means.
	Connectivity C_7	Availability and reliability of 5G signals and free Wi-Fi within the area.
	Lodging comfort C_8	Quality of accommodations in terms of design, lighting, and amenities.
	Waste disposal C_9	How efficiently trash is collected and managed.
	Visitor information C_{10}	Presence of clear explanations and educational materials at tourist centers and major sites.
	Signage C_{11}	Visibility, clarity, and language accessibility of directional and informational signs.
	Parking C_{12}	Location, size, and convenience of parking areas for visitors.
B_3 services	Hospitality C_{13}	The courtesy and professionalism of service staff.
	Complaint response C_{14}	How quickly and helpfully local managers address tourist issues.
	Local Food Quality C_{15}	Taste and value of meals served in family-run rural eateries.
	Payment options C_{16}	Availability of mobile and digital payment methods.
	Online services C_{17}	How well the destination is integrated with travel apps and social media platforms.
	Tour guide quality C_{18}	Number and helpfulness of guides, as well as their attitude toward visitors.
	Range of activities C_{19}	How many and what types of things tourists can do while visiting.

Measure dimensions	Observing indicators	Indicator description
B_4 activities	Uniqueness C_{20}	How distinctive and appealing the local events are compared to those in other villages.
	Environmental fit C_{21}	Whether the activities blend well with the natural and social surroundings.
	Cultural integration C_{22}	How well local traditions and farming culture are represented in the events.
	Visitor engagement C_{23}	The extent to which tourists are encouraged to take part in hands-on experiences.
B_5 emotional	Peace and escape C_{24}	A sense of calm, coziness, and escape from urban life.
	Enjoyment C_{25}	Feelings of happiness, fun, and entertainment during the visit.
	Emotional relief C_{26}	The opportunity to temporarily let go of stress and find emotional release.
	Aesthetic pleasure C_{27}	A deep sense of beauty and emotional connection with the surroundings.
	Learning C_{28}	Educational value gained from the rural setting, including local knowledge and culture.