

# Creating tangible and intangible hospitality products with a sustainable value – The case of the Altes Land apples

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This paper focuses on a specific sub-part of hospitality, namely sustainable product creation via regional integration. According to the research question “To what extent does the integration of local apple products contribute to regional sustainable value creation in Altes Land in regard to tourism stakeholders?” this research examined the sustainable value – defined as people, planet, profit – created by one specific regional food speciality, the apples of Altes Land. The region Altes Land, situated close to Hamburg, Germany, is known for its apple products and promotes them as part of the cultural heritage of the region. For this purpose, the concepts were defined as regional value creation, sustainable value creation and regional food products. The primary research was conducted in the form of thirteen interviews with farmers, inhabitants and domestic visitors. In addition, observation was conducted in the area with a focus on the farms. The outcomes of the research highlight multiple values created, where all the different types of interviewees perceived values on all three levels. The apples and their production are seen as both of a high cultural value and also as making an economic and environmental contribution to the region. In economic terms, both visitors and inhabitants are also willing to pay more and specifically look out for these apples when shopping, hence a special value is also attached to them.

**Keywords:** sustainable value creation, local food products

## Introduction

Over the years the tourism industry has experienced continued growth, which consequently leads to competition between different touristic destinations (UNWTO, 2015). In order to attract visitors and increase their competitiveness, tourism destinations focus even more on their unique features, and tangible as well as intangible assets such as gastronomy that act as distinguishing features for the country or region (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). These add value to its tourism product, which consequently contributes to tourism development (Du Cros, 2013; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Thus, the regional and local food products of a destination can serve not only to meet the visitors' physiological needs for food but can also act as a major driver for the tourism sector, as local food products can create value for the region. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to new observations and findings regarding the sustainable value creation and integration of local food products of a touristic destination.

The chosen destination this paper focuses on is Altes Land. The region Altes Land is located downstream from Hamburg on the southwestern side of the River Elbe, and was firstly settled in the middle ages by Dutch immigrants (Stade Tourismus, 2015). Due to its fertile area reclaimed from marshy ground, the region is the largest contiguous fruit-producing region in Central Europe (Kleefeld, Burggraaff, & Lange, 2007). The total cultivation area of the fruits takes up approximately 10 500 hectares of Altes Land. Due to the fact that the region is the largest area for the cultivation of apple trees, as it occupies about 90% of the acreage (Stade Tourismus, 2015;

Mein Altes Land, 2013), Altes Land with one outstanding characteristic food product was chosen as the subject for this paper. In addition to that, the annual quantity of apples harvested on average at the Lower Elbe amounts to 280 000 to 340 000 tons. Thereby, the total production value of the fruits generated annually within the region is 180 million euros and provides employment for 2 100 persons (Welterbe Altes Land, 2015), hence its importance not only from an economical but also from a social perspective within the local food sector. Many farms have cafés or sell apple juice as a souvenir. Hence, specifically the fact that tourism is involved with the production, consumption and distribution of the products is important and is respected in this paper.

Therefore, the problem statement was formulated as: *To what extent does the integration of local apple products contribute to the regional sustainable value creation in Altes Land in regard to the tourism sector?* With the problem statement as guideline, the following objectives are outlined:

1. A detailed synthesis of the academic knowledge of local food products, sustainability and value creation
2. An investigation of the Altes Land inhabitants and domestic visitors in regard to the apple products of the region
3. An overview of to what extent value is created on the different sustainability dimensions.

Thus, the outcome of this research project identifies to what extent the integration of local products contributes to the value creation and sustainable tourism development of a region. This paper determines also the possible benefits of a sustainable development of the tourism sector when integrating regional food products. Thereby, the importance of the value creation

through the integration of these products is identified and its impact on different levels such as the environment, society as well as economy.

### Literature review

This section provides an overview about the most relevant concepts of this research. The purpose behind the following paragraphs is to introduce the concepts that form the basis of the theme and suggest the indicators that are used for the research. The review starts with a definition of local food products and then elaborates on their use in tourism. The next section then draws the link to sustainability and specifically sustainable value creation. This topic is specifically applied to the destination.

For many years, local food products have become the focus of attention of policymakers, academics and food system supporters due to the fact that the production of local food products is viewed as a substitute for conventional food products (Duram, 2011). Firstly, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) and Sims (2009) stated that the definition of local food products is rather complicated since the ingredients of the local food product and the place of production, manufacture and selling might not be located within the same region. However, it is outlined that definitions of local food products differentiate each other through distance, political boundaries as well as special criteria such as emotional dimensions and personal relationships with the region (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Long, 2014). Concerning distance, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) elaborated that food products can be associated as local if the production and sales of the product ranged from 10 to 30 miles up to 100 miles. Contrastingly, Kirwan and Maye (2013), Sims (2009) and Hall and Gössling (2013) disagreed that the only acceptable definition of local food products is food that is produced and sold within the distance of a 30 mile (50 km) radius. Further, political and geographical boundaries such as countries, provinces and states define local food products in relation to the brand names or brand image that establish a connection with a specific area (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015).

Coming to the emotional dimensions and personal relationships of the regional area, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) noted that this social relation occurs because the origin of the local products is based on home-grown products and products produced by friends, neighbours or relatives. Sometimes, local products are specifically associated with a particular destination that is well recognised by the production process or the growing of a product.

Bosona and Gebresenbet (2011) also acknowledged that the production, consumption as well as the retailing of local food products needs to remain in one specific area. Furthermore, Duram (2011) argued that organic vegetables, fruits and berries are the most well-known local food products among society. Moreover, the term "local" is directly related to sustainability, authenticity, quality as well as community (Duram, 2011).

Duram (2013) also pointed out that local products that are sustainably produced and locally grown have competitive advantage since an added value of freshness, flavour and nutrition is predominant. Further, Hall and Gössling (2013) illustrated that the concept of local food or localness provides

single communities or small geographical areas with the opportunity to promote their own identity and simultaneously strengthen the development of sustainability by producing and consuming local products. It is agreed that local products can contribute to the destination image and to sustainability, as well as being a unique selling point of the region, if they are integrated well.

According to Hall and Gössling (2013), the use and integration of local food products in the tourism sector is often associated with tourism in rural areas. The use of local food products in tourism is done in various ways, from using local food products in menus in restaurants or cafés, visitors inspecting regional farms and regional agricultural methods, to organising food and wine events such as culinary festivals. Besides that, Duram (2011) mentioned that it is mainly small or middle-size farms that launch the integration of local food systems. Thus, the distribution of local products is done directly through farmers' markets, roadside farm stands, community-supported agriculture, pick-your own procedures, and local restaurants, bakeries, etc.

Coming to the economic impacts of the integration of local food products, Hall and Gössling (2013) noted direct as well as indirect impacts. Firstly, the direct impacts refer to the sales of the products and the employment of the local inhabitants due to the increase in production, processing, manufacturing, and distribution systems. Secondly, indirect impacts include the benefits the brand names of local food products create within the rural economy. Furthermore, the sales and employment that arise from tourist spending on accommodation and touristic rural activities are also related to indirect impacts (Hall & Gössling, 2013).

In general, the motivation of people buying or supporting local food varies between organisations, institutions and individuals (Feldman & Hamm, 2014). However, Duram (2011) stated that the interest of people buying sustainable high-quality food is continuously growing. As stated in Feldmann and Hamm (2015) and Duram (2011), the most significant motivation for buying local products is to be climate and environmentally friendly. For some consumers, the environmental impacts of conventional agriculture are extremely meaningful so that they only consider buying local food products (Kirwan & Maye, 2013). Moreover, Duram (2011) noted that local food consumers want to protect the local food and at the same time support local businesses such as local farmers and local food producers. Besides that, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) argued that other consumers have a more hedonistic view of local food products and buy them for reasons of freshness, safety and health.

The integration of local food products can cause benefits as well as challenges for the people and the planet. Starting with the benefits of the integration of local food products, Hall and Gössling (2013) acknowledged that the integration of local food products benefits the society and economy since the number of distributors who pass food from producer to consumers is reduced. Thus, these benefits can have impacts on the economy, the society as well as on the environment. Duram (2011) demonstrated that the integration of local food products strengthens the local economy since the income of farmers' increases and the multiplier effect induces that the money generated from the integration stays within the local

area. Coming to social benefits, Hall and Gössling (2013) mentioned that due to the integration, the human face within the food production gets the focus of attention since the use of machine production fades into the background. When considering rural development, it becomes clear that the integration of local food products benefits the rural community since local food products add value to the local area, create a regional identity, support activities such as tourism, strengthen social interaction and improve employment opportunities (Duram, 2011). Additionally, old traditional and indigenous methods of food production will be preserved for the future. The integration of local food in terms of food festivals or local food events might establish a relationship between local inhabitants, local food producers and local food products and might create pride among members of society (Hall & Gössling, 2013). Lastly, the integration of local food products also benefits the environment and enhances sustainability since fewer chemicals and pesticides are used, and production processes are more sustainable due to a less use of energy. Moreover, packaging materials and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are decreased since the transportation of local food products is limited and packaging is not necessary (Duram, 2011). Furthermore, Duram (2011) and Bosona and Gebresenbet (2011) note that local food products are healthier, taste better and are more nutritious than conventionally produced goods.

Considering sustainability as a part of sustainable regional integration: the leading principle for sustainability is sustainable development and it is defined as regarding the needs and wants of the present while considering the needs and wants of the future generation (Page & Connell, 2009; Cooper, 2009). Cavagnaro and Curiel (2012) added that the major goal of sustainability is guaranteeing a better quality of living for current as well as future generations. Nevertheless Page and Connell (2009) underlined the challenging broadness of sustainability due to the significance and operation of this concept. It consists of three dimensions: economic, social and environmental (Cooper, 2005, Bilge et al. 2014). Cavagnaro and Curiel (2012) illustrated the three levels of sustainability

(Figure 1) by considering the three levels society, organisation and individual. The dimension of sustainable society “by pursuing responsible economic growth, equitable social progress, and effective environmental process” (Cavagnaro & Curiel, 2012, p. 1) cannot be realised without the aid of organisations and individuals. Hence, individuals have to take the action to transform an organisation or business into a sustainable organisation. At the same time, when an organisation or individuals benefit on one of the dimensions of people, planet, profit, the society or region they live in benefits as well. Therefore the conclusion must be drawn that sustainability is a multidimensional concept where individuals, organisations and society are interlinked with each other and should benefit on all three dimensions.

Sustainability is a tricky issue especially for value creation of a destination, as the different dimensions might conflict with each other. Some consumers prefer sustainable products but research has also shown on the other hand that customers’ perceptions are not always equally positive (Kumer, 2014). Holleran (2008) highlights that particularly in tourism destinations the different dimensions might clash, e.g. the expenditures of tourists benefit the destination economically while their waste and resource use leaves environmental damage, so that there is a relationship between tourism’s economic profits and its environmental disadvantages, for instance, regarding climate changes.

Sustainability is an important aspect for this research project due to the fact that it focuses on the sustainable integration and value creation of apple products. The broadness of sustainability has been identified in this literature review and therefore needs to be applied to this project. Individuals (farmers, tourists) related to an organisation were interviewed. Applying the three levels of sustainability, we explore the value created for and by the organisations and the people that benefit the region Altes Land.

### Research design

In order to answer the problem statement of this paper appropriately, three research questions were formulated. First the research questions are outlined, and then the data collection is elaborated.

The research questions were:

1. What are benefits and challenges of the regional integration of the local apple products perceived by producers in regard to the three levels of sustainability?
2. How do inhabitants of Altes Land value the regional apple products?
3. How do domestic visitors value the regional apple products of Altes Land?

The three research questions each concentrate on one of the perspectives: producers, local inhabitants and domestic visitors.

The primary research was designed as a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. This was done due to the limited number of research units and the aim to explore the different perspectives in depth. Value, a major phenomenon studied in this research is an entirely subjective and qualitative phenomenon and as the idea was to explore the phenomenon from different perspectives, a qualitative approach was justified. However,

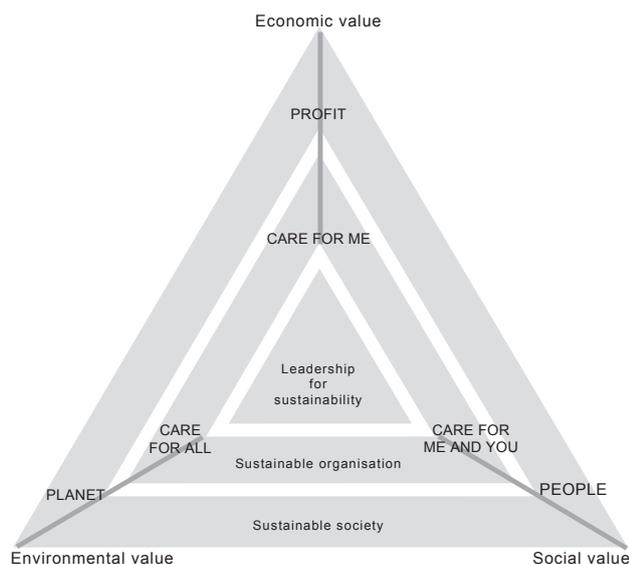


Figure 1: Three Levels of Sustainability

as the interviews were conducted in the region, it seemed appropriate to conduct observation additionally to the interviews, as this might give information that respondents fail to state in words or show a behaviour that they do not notice themselves, e.g. pride and cultural identity might be expressed in deeds but not necessarily stated in words.

With a guideline of 10 interviews, in total 13 interviews were conducted in the end to reach the saturation point of the sub-groups. The interviews were conducted on site and differed in length; while some interviews took about 30 minutes, others, especially with locals, were rather short. Afterwards, they were transcribed and analysed according to Boeije (2014).

## Results and analysis

### ***Benefits and obstacles of regional integration of local apple products in regard to the three levels of sustainability***

This part of the study focuses on presenting and analysing the results gained through semi-structured interviews and observations at the destination. Here, the benefits and obstacles are presented according to the subgroups domestic visitors, inhabitants of Altes Land and lastly, interviews with regional farmers.

Firstly, domestic visitors were asked if they considered apple products as a cultural asset of Altes Land. All six participants agreed with the statement and saw the local apple products as a cultural asset of the region. While one visitor stated that the region has been known for apple picking for many years, two assigned great importance to them as the cultivation and selling of apple products is a tradition of the region which has been obtained and passed on during the years and identifies the region. Linking this to the literature review, this outcome describes a social benefit of integration since the apple products contribute to a regional identity as well as expressing tradition and culture for the visitors interviewed.

As stated in the literature review, regional food products can be distributed in several ways, such as through farmer shops, roadside farm stands, pick-your own procedures, etc. (Duram, 2011). Therefore, domestic visitors were asked if and where they buy local apple products of the region. Two out of the six participants interviewed responded that they purchase apple products of the region directly at one of the farm shops in Altes Land, and one buys them on the market in Hamburg, but not always on purpose. The other three of the six domestic visitors interviewed ignored the question whether they would buy apple products of the region or that they do not purchase them on purpose.

The domestic visitors were also asked if they find sustainable cultivation of the apple products important. All six domestic visitors interviewed considered a sustainable cultivation process for the local food products as essential and of great importance. Here, one domestic visitor emphasised that it is ecologically worthwhile and important to keep the cultivation sustainable since the purchase of regional apple products produces less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions due to a short transportation distance. Another interviewee added that it contributes to the health of herself and her family. In addition, another domestic visitor agreed on the importance of sustainability, but doubted to what extent the region sticks to sustainable cultivation as "most of the workers [at several farms in Altes Land] come from abroad and are poorly paid".

The six domestic visitors were also asked why they think it is important to support the purchase of apple products from the Altes Land region. Five out of six participants thought it was important to support the local products of the destination. One interviewee stated that she wants to support the local farmers of Altes Land in order to protect the environment since the distribution of the apple products causes fewer carbon emissions. In addition to that, these domestic visitors shared the opinion that the purchase of local apple products contributes to increasing the financial income of farmers to finally maintain and support the existence of traditional family businesses. One of them added that it is important to buy apple products of Altes Land to pass on and share the variety of apple types and the experience of the process for future generations to finally preserve the culture of the region.

To conclude, the interviews revealed that the participating domestic visitors saw social, economic as well as environmental benefits from the regional integration of apple products. This result corresponds to the theoretical concept of the sustainable individual as it outlines that the sustainable cultivation of apple products in Altes Land contributes to better living conditions for current individuals as well as for future generations.

The inhabitants of Altes Land were also interviewed about the integration of regional apple products to determine possible benefits as well as challenges in regard to the three levels of sustainability. Firstly, it needs to be mentioned that it was hard to find inhabitants that were willing to participate in the interviews on site. Thus, the outcome for this part of the study is drawn from only three interviews with inhabitants of the region.

Regarding the question if they consider local apple products as a cultural asset of the region, all three interviewed inhabitants agreed with the statement, and one also added that it is part of the tradition and expresses the culture. One interviewee thought that the apple products characterise the whole region. Asked if they were proud of the apple products of Altes Land, all three participants simply agreed that they were. Thus it seems that the pride of the inhabitants and the tradition expressed in regard to their local products can be seen as a social benefit since it contributes to cultural and social identity. Furthermore, two out of three interviewees stated that they purchase local apple products directly at farm shops, though they also added that they buy them at an organic grocery store or at a supermarket.

According to Duram (2011), local food products can also be integrated on menus in restaurants or cafés. Therefore, the inhabitants of the region were also asked if it is obvious to them that local apple products are used in public facilities such as cafés and restaurants in the region. Two out of three interviewees stated that the apple products of Altes Land are part of the local menus. Thus, the use of local apple products is recognised in several variants such as apple pies, apple juice or apple liquor. So, there is some integration and it also indicates that the region makes use of its environmental resources as another benefit.

Coming to the aspect of the tourism sector, it can be identified that all three inhabitants interviewed thought that local apple products also attract tourists to the region of Altes Land, especially during the summer months or during events such as the "Blütenfest" (blossom festival). Thus, it can be concluded that the integration of local apple products

contributes to the tourism sector in Altes Land. Consequently and due to the use of the environmental resources the region can recognise an economical benefit since the number of tourists increases at the destination.

In the literature it was stated that the integration of local food products strengthens the local economy since the income of farmers increases and the multiplier effect induces that the money generated from the integration stays within the local area (Duram, 2011). Considering this aspect, the inhabitants noticed benefits for the region through the cultivation, production and sale of apple products, e.g. that it creates new job opportunities and significantly contributes to the local economy.

Lastly, four farmers were interviewed about benefits and challenges. Starting with a social aspect, all four interviewed farmers answered in the affirmative that they are proud of the apple products of Altes Land. One even stated that she is extremely proud of her products as it is one of the most important possessions in the life of both her family and herself. Another farmer expressed his pride as well by his behaviour during the interviews. He enthusiastically shared his knowledge about local apple products and also offered the interviewers samples of his apple products. Conclusively, all four participating farmers stated that they are proud of their local apple products since they are part of their daily life and/or are the main source of income for them and their family. These are social benefits.

Coming to the touristic aspect, all four farmers agreed that the apple products of Altes Land are a motivation for visitors to go there, which they notice as tourists pass by the farms and farm shops. While it is mainly loyal local customers who buy directly, it is noticeable that specifically during high season such as the harvesting season, many tourists travel to the region and are attracted by the natural environment and the traditional products.

Regarding the concept of the sustainable organisation, the participating farmers were asked if jobs have been created for their friends or relatives through the cultivation, production or distribution of local apple products. Three out of four interviewees state that the apple production created job opportunities for their socio-environment. Two interviewees specifically highlight that their farm shop is mostly run by their family members or another full-time work employee. During the harvesting season additional seasonal workers are employed at all three farms, however, the seasonal workers for the harvest come from abroad and consequently interrupt the multiplier chain and do not contribute to the local economy.

Considering advantages due to the production and selling of the local apple products for the region, both economic and social benefits were mentioned and elaborated by the farmers, both personally for themselves (feeling at home, income for the family) and for the region. Additionally, the on-site observations reveal that the integration of local apple products also has environmental benefits due to the fact that most of the farmers use eco-friendly packing materials such as wooden boxes and cartons. An interesting addition to this is that none of the four farmers consider apple production as a seasonal business due to innovative and effective storage facilities that enable the apple products to stay fresh for months. Thus, apple production guarantees the farmers an all-year business and a stable financial income as they can sell their products the whole year round.

### **Valuation of regional apple products by inhabitants of Altes Land**

The integration of regional and local food products can be evaluated in the terms of economy, society, and environment.

In the economic valuation of the regional apple products of Altes Land, on the one hand, the willingness to buy the apple products but also the willingness to spend more money for sustainably produced apples is examined. Two of three inhabitants buy local apple products up to one or two times a week in local farmers' shops. The types Elstar and Jonagold are mentioned as the most frequently bought apple products according to one of the inhabitants. One inhabitant purchases apple products seldom but like the other inhabitants mostly at local farmers' shops or markets. In addition to that, inhabitants were asked if they are willing to spend more money for sustainable apple products in comparison to similar products from the supermarket with the result that the three inhabitants are willing to spend more money for it. Due to the fact that the apple products are perceived to be healthier and of better quality than from the supermarket, it does not matter to them if it is slightly more expensive, as the (perceived) value is higher and local employment is supported. For the local farmers the economic value of the apple products is very important due to the fact that they are dependent on the expenditures of the consumers. The apple production is their business that makes up their revenue and is the central point of their lives and their overall aim is to make much economic profit. Like the inhabitants, the local farmers are willing to spend more money for sustainably produced products compared to products where the sustainable background is unclear. In addition, the farmers created their own brand identity with the products. As stated in the literature review, Duram (2011) mentioned that consumers of local and regional food products want to protect the products and are willing to support the economy of local farmers and producers with buying their products. This can be also seen in this research project because the interviewed inhabitants buy local food products in farm shops. Moreover, Hall and Gössling (2013) demonstrated the direct impacts of local food products. As mentioned in the interviews with inhabitants and farmers, the local apple products create employment in the family business with several generations are involved. Indirect benefits (Hall & Gössling, 2013, Gummerus, 2013) are the brand identity and image created with the apples.

The social valuation identifies that the apples represent the cultural identity of the region and the tradition of Altes Land. The interviews conducted among the inhabitants give evidence that the apples and farmers' shops are the topics most closely associated with Altes Land. The inhabitants agree on the fact that the apples belong to the culture of Altes Land and that it can be defined as a tradition and that they are proud of it, statements the four local farmers agree with. Moreover, the farmers run family businesses that create an interaction on a business level as well as a social level. Referring to the question whether the growing, production and disposal have advantages for the region, they state that the fruit production belongs to Altes Land and that the region cannot survive without the growing of fruits. Furthermore, Altes Land is a sign and unique selling point for apple products. One farmer outlines the fact that the fruit growing represent the Altes Land due to the fact that the production is not possible in a

lot of regions. The proudness about the apple products is a significant focus of all participants, inhabitants and farmers. For instance one offered free sample of the apple juice and another gave two apples for free in order to show the products and share the unique value. All in all the farmers share more information than asked for. Moreover, several points of social interaction are realised according to customer relationship, activities and knowledge and background information. During the observation it could be identified that majority of the shops have a lot of loyal customers that are addressed personally by the farmer and that the relationship between farmer and customer is close. Furthermore, several social activities such as personalised apples, tasting, tours and plant your own apple tree connects the local farmers with their customers. Further, the given background knowledge and information evidenced that the farmers are highly aware of their business and about rules and regulations.

As outlined in the literature review, Feldmann and Hamm (2015) discussed that this social relation occurs since the origin of the local products is based on home-grown products and products produced by friends, neighbours or relatives. The participants of the interview share the opinion that the apple products belong to Altes Land and that the farm shops are family run businesses. Hall and Gössling (2013) also emphasised this fact with illustrating the concept of local food or localness provides single communities or small geographical areas the opportunity to promote their own identity. Altes Land itself has a cultural identity and the apple products are part of the tradition in the region.

The environmental values consist of sustainable feature, unique environmental selling points and the growing conditions of the region Altes Land. Besides the economic and social valuation, also the environmental values are associated with Altes Land. Based on the question if sustainable production of apple products is important, two of three inhabitants value it highly. The sustainable growing, production without pesticide pollution and reduced transportation are relevant as well as the fact that the origin of the product is known and how it is produced. The inhabitants value the environmental conditions of the apples from Altes Land and the quality, freshness and taste are relatively better compared to commercial products from the supermarket.

The local farmers associate the Altes Land with unique environmental features such as the mild maritime climate, the Elbe, calm atmosphere, close connection to the city of Stade as well as the conditions of the ground for growing in order to get the special aroma of the apples. In addition to that the freshness of the fruits due to short distance to markets is highlighted. Also, the growing conditions of the apples contribute to the attraction of tourists because the taste of the apples from Altes Land is more tart than apples from the south, which are sweeter. This is an added value to the environment of Altes Land.

Based on the observation, the four farmers produce the apple products in a sustainable and eco-friendly manner. Focusing on the packing material for the apple products, the average sell the products in plastic or paper bags to the customers with the reason that clients prefer to see the products and it is place saving compared to for instance wooden boxes. Some farmers also highlight sustainability and eco-friendliness as an important philosophy, as it is future

proof. One farmer is currently changing the apple production to a sustainable approach and change packing material to paper bags.

#### ***Domestic visitors' valuation of the regional apple products of Altes Land***

Similar to the last section, the following results are divided into economic, social and environmental valuation. Starting with the economic valuation of the regional apple products of Altes Land it can be said that this includes the willingness to pay and the actual market value assuring the economic support of the region. Three out of six domestic visitors buy apple products of the Altes Land. One participant travels to the Altes Land once per week to buy the apple products. The other two participants buy apple products of the Altes Land at the weekly market. The three participants that do not travel to the Altes Land to buy Apple products state that they might buy them on the market or in the supermarket but not always intentionally. However, they do mention to either have visited fruit shops or that it is important to buy local to support the local economy and therefore select local products. In addition, the domestic visitors were asked if they would be willing to spend more money on local and regional produced apple products compared to apple products which can be bought in the supermarket. All visitors would agree with these reasons to buy local products and that the quality is noticeably higher. One participant said that he would pay more to support the cultural value of the product and therefore maintain its availability. According to Duram (2011), local food consumers want to protect the local food and support the local businesses, including local farmers and local food producers. This overlaps with the information obtained in the interviews.

When looking at the social valuation of the apple products of the Altes Land by domestic visitors, it can be said that this valuation has a high importance to most of the participants. Social valuation includes the cultural identity and the expression of traditions by the host community. While asking the domestic visitors what they think of when hearing the term Altes Land, the first things that they said was apples, fruits and farm stands. Furthermore, one states that the Altes Land is well known for its apple products and that it would not be the Altes Land without them. All six visitors see the local apple products of the Altes Land as a cultural asset. One explains that the Altes Land with its agriculture as a cultural asset because it has been build up out of nothing creating a cultural value. In addition, the region is known all over Germany for its apples. Local fruit-growing should be supported since these apple products contain a cultural value and traditions carried for many years. Doing so, experiences are handed over to younger generations maintaining the apple production in the Altes Land.

Coming to the environmental valuation of the local apple products of the Altes Land it can be said that domestic visitors are aware of the environment and the sustainable fruit-growing. Firstly, they mention the quality of the apple including its freshness and the good taste. Secondly, they are convinced about the sustainable production including a limited use of pesticides and short transport distances to the end-consumer. Speaking of that, all six participants state that it is important to support sustainable grown apple products.

## Conclusion

Due to the high contribution of apples to the regional and local integration it brings challenges and benefits with it on the economic, social and environmental level. The local economy of Altes Land benefits with the creation of employments for the family run businesses and due to the home-grown products employments among relatives, friends and neighbours are created. This also contributes to the multiplier effect. Moreover, the apple production is not dependent on the season and therefore the local farmers benefit financially from it the entire year. In addition to that, farmers are dependent on the expenditures of the consumers and on the fact that the apple products attract domestic visitors and tourists. To summarise, the economic dimension of the local producers and of the region benefits all year around and would not be viable without using the apples for tourism purposes. There are smaller leakages such as income flows to the home countries of seasonal workers, but this does not significantly disrupt the economic importance.

There are a number of societal benefits, such as pride and the preservation of culture. Some items, such as the preservation of family structures and the pride of contributing actively to a characteristic of the region have not been noted in prior research on the benefits of local food products.

Coming to the environment the short transportation distance represents an enormous environmental benefit due to fewer emissions when products are grown, produced and sold in the same region. For example, the inhabitants and also domestic visitors value the fact that the apples are grown and sold in the same region. Of special note here is that it seems a given both for providers and consumers that local food products should be produced in an environmentally friendly manner. A major value of this development impacts both nature and society: the environment with its distinguishing characteristics is preserved.

Hence, the integration of apple products from the region of Altes Land is valued environmentally due to the sustainable production of the products and the added value due to the location and climate. Moreover, the integration of the products has competitive advantages to other regions due to unique environmental features and special growing conditions. The regional sustainable value creation is visible among every target groups that vary from inhabitants of the city of Hamburg but also from others cities of Germany.

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