

# **Willing Workers On Organic Farms: A Case Study**

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**2001**

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## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the following people for their contribution to the research upon which this summary is based.

To Jane and Andrew Strange and whanau – for your hospitality, willingness to be interviewed and ongoing support of this research. Without your collaboration, there would be no thesis!

To the Research Participants – for your wonderful words and precious insights. I enjoyed listening to and thinking about our conversations so much I know I'm going to miss you all now that this research is finished.

## **Use of this report**

The information provided in this report is freely available for use by all members of WWOOF (New Zealand). However, any written reference to any information in this report must include appropriate acknowledgements and/or citations to this summary, or the thesis.

# 1 Introduction

The exploratory case study "Willing Workers on Organic Farms: A Case Study" investigates the travel motivations of backpackers, plus the dynamics of the relationship between these travel motivations and the organisation Willing Workers on Organic Farms (New Zealand) (WWOOF). It also examines some unique qualities of WWOOF as a tourism provider, and concludes that WWOOF can be considered as a form of decommmodified ecotourism.<sup>1</sup>

The research methodology used was in-depth, qualitative interviews with the administrators of WWOOF (Andrew and Jane Strange), and backpackers who were members of WWOOF. This research was not intended to produce data that generated a picture of the overall characteristics of the whole population of backpackers who joined WWOOF. Instead, it was conducted to establish what some of those characteristics may be, and to explore these characteristics in depth.

The first part of this summary discusses the position of WWOOF within the tourism industry in New Zealand, and outlines certain qualities of WWOOF which suggests that WWOOF can be classified as model of decommmodified ecotourism. Part two introduces the research participants (describing who they are, where they are from, and how long they stayed on WWOOF farms), and explains how they heard about WWOOF. Part three explores why backpackers join WWOOF. Part four discusses how backpackers choose the farms they stay on, and suggests some changes to the WWOOF booklet.<sup>2</sup> A unique characteristic of WWOOF is that members must work for a minimum of four hours a day. This characteristic can generate certain expectations and tensions between backpackers and host farmers, and part five discusses how such expectations and tensions influence backpacker travel experiences of WWOOF. Part six outlines some issues that arise specifically for backpackers who are interested in learning organic farming techniques. Part seven describes an ideal farm from a worker's point of view, and links those ideal qualities to specific travel motivations. The last section of this summary explores the future of WWOOF, with respect to its membership population, and relationship with the tourism industry in general.

## 1.1 WWOOF and the Tourism Industry

WWOOF first began in 1971 in Britain, and started in New Zealand in 1974. WWOOF is linked to the 'organics movement', which first emerged in Western countries in the 1960s. This movement represented a collective response to concern about the link between food production, the use of chemical fertilisers and sprays, environmental degradation, and human health.<sup>3</sup> WWOOF (New Zealand) is a scheme by which a register of organic farms is compiled and maintained for the

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<sup>1</sup> This case study was conducted in order to partially fulfil academic assessment requirements for the completion of an MA (Applied) Social Science Research. The thesis submitted for this degree is titled "Willing Workers on Organic Farms: A Case Study", and can be obtained through interloan from the Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> The WWOOF booklets that these comments are based on are the 1999/2000 booklets. Similar changes may have already been implemented in the latest booklet, without the author's knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Much of this discussion in this executive summary is based on an extensive literature review of many authors, few of whom are acknowledged due to the need to keep the report as short as possible. However, key authors are acknowledged in the reference list appended to this summary, and all authors are cited in the thesis.

purposes of facilitating an exchange between WWOOF workers and host farms.<sup>4</sup> The structure and operation of WWOOF offers an unusual context for this investigation of backpacker travel motivations, and the following discussion outlines this context.

Even though 95% of the members of WWOOF (New Zealand) are travellers from overseas, WWOOF cannot be considered as part of the institutionalised tourism industry in Aotearoa/New Zealand for a number of reasons. Firstly, WWOOF is not explicitly promoted (via the web page or WWOOF booklet) as an organisation that caters for tourists.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the organisers of WWOOF have little or no contact with other tourism providers. Thirdly, even though WWOOF has an organisational structure, it in itself is not an institution. Fourthly, apart from the initial joining fee of \$30, host farmers do not make a quantifiable profit out of hosting WWOOF workers, which is usually an economic priority of businesses and organisations which are part of the institutionalised tourism industry. Finally, the 'service/s' provided by WWOOF are made available to tourists in private households, rather than in public, commercial tourist places.

These characteristics place WWOOF in a unique relationship to other tourism providers. Even though its 'customer base' consists mainly of tourists, it is an organisation that operates outside of the institutionalised, integrated tourism industry. WWOOF is therefore an organisation that provides services for tourists in a way which does not necessarily depend upon, include or exploit the same physical spaces or social relations commonly used by, or employed in the conventional tourism industry.

## 1.2 Ecotourism and WWOOF

Ecotourism has been proposed by some as an 'ideal' form of alternative tourism which simultaneously serves to protect the environment and sustain local communities. 'Ecotourism' (and tourism in general) has attracted a great deal of criticism over the last ten years. One of those criticisms includes an observation that tourist operators have appropriated the term ecotourism and exploited it with little regard to the principles that underlie it, thus continuing to wreak the damage that 'conventional' tourism has on local communities and environments. Some of the negative impacts of ecotourism on the environment include increased pollution, and the destruction of indigenous ecosystems through the clearing of land for accommodation and to meet an increased demand for food or tourism facilities. Human communities can be displaced, and deprived of their traditional livelihoods in the name of conservation and ecotourism. Another criticism is the way in which nature becomes a product that is used as a marketing device to sell a speciality travel for profit (Wearing, 1998). This is usually termed as the 'commodification of nature'.

In a response to the above criticisms of ecotourism, Wearing (1997, 1998) suggests a number of qualities that constitute an 'ideal' ecotourism. All of these can be found within the aims of WWOOF. The aims of WWOOF are:

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<sup>4</sup> There are two groups of people who participate in WWOOF. One group is the volunteer workers who stay on the farm and donate their labour in exchange for free board, the opportunity to learn organic farming skills, and to stay with members of the local community. This group will be referred to as 'workers'. The other group is the farmers and their families who welcome and host volunteer workers on their farms and in their homes on a temporary basis. This group will be referred to as 'host farmers', or 'hosts'.

<sup>5</sup> Instead, WWOOF is promoted as catering for 'town dwellers' (Strange & Strange, 1999:1).

- (1) To enable people to *learn first hand* organic growing techniques
- (2) To enable town-dwellers to *experience* living and working on a farm
- (3) To *show alternative ways* of life
- (4) To *improve communication* between the organic movement
- (5) To help develop confidence in becoming *self sufficient*
- (6) To *meet interesting people and make useful contacts*

(Strange & Strange, 1999:1) (Italics my own)

Wearing (1997) argues that the primary aim of ecotourism 'revolves around people experiencing natural areas and their respective local communities first hand, thus the potentiality exists that they will more likely be concerned with preserving them'. Ecotourism should encourage an active participation in nature, and have an educative purpose. Aims number one and number two of WWOOF endeavour to provide an immediate and educative experience within a natural environment (the farms or communities that the workers stay on).

The emphasis on the educative aims of WWOOF was also revealed in the interview with the administrators of WWOOF, Andrew and Jane Strange. Even though Andrew Strange estimates that the number of tourists who join with the express intention to learn about organic farming and environmental issues are in the minority, he states '*(w)e'd like to think that WWOOF is there to inspire people to be organic and healthy and show what it's actually all about, because a lot of people don't actually know and that's what it was actually started for*'. Jane Strange added '*it's like preaching to the unconverted... they're the ones that need to learn things.... there's no point just staying as a small little ('converted') group of people who aren't attracting other people.*' (text in brackets my own addition).

Wearing argues that ecotourism must also stress the importance of local host communities, and contribute to community development within those communities (1998). Ecotourism should achieve this by 'the breaking down of the barriers to co-operation, understanding the wider implication of issues, linking people together on issue-based actions.' (1997). Aims number four and six encourage the development of an organic issues-based community through the exchange and circulation of knowledge and generation of networks between WWOOF hosts and WWOOF workers. Aim number three also implies a goal to educate workers about hosts and communities that are different. A sense of WWOOF requiring workers to *contribute* to the hosts and communities that accommodate them is made explicit by the statement 'WWOOFers also have the opportunity to give something productive back to the land and the people during their stay' (Strange & Strange, 1999: 3).

Wearing (1998) suggests ways in which ecotourism can be 'decommodified', so that environmental preservation and community development is prioritised and enhanced. For example, he argues that ecotourism should provide opportunities for training and employment for host communities, and be educational for the tourist. These recommendations are made for an industry whose primary purpose is to make a profit. However, such suggestions do not include the *minimisation* of profit extraction, or the removal of profit extraction altogether. WWOOF is an organisation that successfully provides an ecotourism product that involves no or little profit extraction between the

host and the worker (through the exchange of money).<sup>6</sup> In addition, the statement ‘... WWOOFers also have the opportunity to give something productive to the land and the people during their stay’ also challenges the notion of tourism as a commodified process. The tourist is invited not only to extract some thing, some sight, or some activity from an environment or host community, but also to engage in a reciprocal manner, by returning something of value (unpaid labour) to the environment or host community. Thus, WWOOF could be considered as being stripped of most processes that commodify both places and people, and therefore a model of decommodified ecotourism.

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<sup>6</sup> However, the administrators of WWOOF charge a small fee to join WWOOF (\$30 for a single person, \$35 for a couple). Therefore, there is a ‘commodified’ relationship between that of the worker and WWOOF administrators.

## 2 Backpackers and WWOOF

### 2.1 Introducing the Research Participants

A total of ten interviews were conducted with six women, (Rachel, Maria, Joyce, Christine, Shuggie and Annie) and four men (Anahata, Sam, Clive, and Lee). Nine participants were aged between 20 to 32, and one participant (Joyce) was in her mid to late forties. All participants lived in cities or towns in their country of origin. Only one had any previous experience of working on a farm prior to joining WWOOF.<sup>7</sup> Their countries of origin included: England (5), the United States of America (2), and one each from Canada, Germany and Korea. Nearly all had some kind of tertiary education, and had either obtained their qualifications or were still studying. Their qualifications or fields of study included early childhood, primary, secondary or adult education, biology, ecology, physiotherapy, law, environmental studies, and information management.

The shortest travel time overall was five months, but some participants were travelling for up to a year. For the very long-term travellers, (about half of the participants) the length of time they spent in Aotearoa/New Zealand was generally only a small proportion of their overall travel time. The other half of the travellers were spending the majority of their travel time in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Christine and Sam had both obtained a one year work visa, and fitted travel and WWOOFing in between periods of paid work.

At the time of their interviews, all participants had stayed on at least two WWOOF farms.<sup>8</sup> Joyce had lived and worked on the highest number of farms (12), all in the North Island. Participants worked on farms in most parts of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Northland in particular was popular with participants (possibly because at the time of the interviews they were travelling in winter, and this part of the country was warmer than southern regions). Other areas included Auckland, Central North Island, Wellington, Nelson, Golden Bay, the West Coast, Banks Peninsula and Otago.

### 2.2 How Research Participants Heard About WWOOF

Seven out of the ten participants heard about WWOOF through word of mouth. This is probably due to the fact that WWOOF is not actively promoted in a systematic way through mainstream channels. Instead, WWOOF is advertised on the Internet or at a very few select sites, such as an organic shop in Nelson. This is primarily because hosts would not be able to accommodate or cater for an increased number of workers if the Stranges widened their promotional drive.<sup>9</sup> Word of mouth recommendation is a time-honoured means by which backpackers find out about travel

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<sup>7</sup> This experience was limited to picking potatoes for paid employment.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of his interview, Anahata had stayed on only one WWOOF farm in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but had WWOOFed previously in Spain and France.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Andrew and Jane Strange, April 2000.

destinations and activities.<sup>10</sup> Sam read about WWOOF in the Lonely Planet, and Annie found out about WWOOF through an advertisement in a backpackers hostel. Rachel heard very vague information about WWOOF through word of mouth, and then eventually located WWOOF via the Internet.

One research participant found that it was difficult to obtain information about WWOOF. When she initially heard about WWOOF through word of mouth, it took her a while to find out how to contact WWOOF administrators, and locate an outlet for the WWOOF booklet. If this information had been more readily available, she would have joined WWOOF at a much earlier stage in her travels throughout New Zealand/Aotearoa.

### **2.3 Length of Time Backpackers Stayed on WWOOF Farms**

The proportion of time spent on WWOOF farms in relation to travel time varied for each participant. Anahata, who was planning to be in Aotearoa/New Zealand for up to nine months, hoped to spend at least half to two thirds of this time WWOOFing. Christine, who at the time of the interview, intended to fit WWOOFing around paid work over a period of a year WWOOFed the least amount of time. Some participants had spent up to a month on a farm, mainly because they particularly enjoyed the company of their hosts. The same participants had also spent only one or two days on farms.

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with WWOOF workers revealed that word of mouth recommendations about farms and hosts were sought out between WWOOF workers, as well as other travel destinations.

### **3 Backpacker Travel Motivations and Why Backpackers Join WWOOF**

The following discussion of the findings on the dynamics between backpacker travel motivations and WWOOF is based on the notions of push and pull travel motivations.

Push and pull touristic motivations and experiences can be considered using both macro and micro levels of analysis. Micro push motivations consist of the personal and immediate interpersonal qualities of the life of an individual in their home country, including the need to escape from the immediate personal environment such as work and family situations. Micro pull motivations consist of the psychological benefits reaped by the individual, such as the need for personal growth and reflection.

Macro push motivations refer to the broader economic, social, political and cultural trends in (primarily Western) societies, which influence and shape travel motivations and choices. These kinds of motivations include the need to escape from increasingly industrialised, urbanised environments, and can include travel choices based on values derived from an awareness of environmental and social issues. Macro pull motivations are linked to specific qualities of the tourist destination. For example, New Zealand/Aotearoa is a popular travel destination because of its pristine natural environment, spectacular scenery, and extensive rural areas.

An individual may travel due to a predominance of push motivations, or pull motivations. They may also travel due to a combination of both.

#### **3.1 Macro Push Motivation: Escape From a Wider Social Context and Urban Environments**

The need to escape from a wider social context and/or urban environments was occasionally explicitly mentioned by research participants as a travel motivation. Christine had become disillusioned with the 'general negativity and apathy' she observed in her home (British) society, and disliked how crowded it was. In reflecting on why she chose to travel to Aotearoa/New Zealand, Maria felt that it provided a refreshing alternative to Germany, which had a 'huge history', big buildings, and was too industrial.

More evidence of this 'push' motivation was revealed when research participants talked about why they joined WWOOF. Participants explained this motivation by describing the perceived disadvantages of urban places (in Western societies), which in turn was complemented by a sense of escaping into more peaceful rural areas. Commonly intertwined with a dislike for urban or industrialised places was ambivalence about certain social and cultural conditions associated with these places, such as consumerism, stress, depersonalised relationships, and exploitative capitalism. Sam commented

*The pace, everybody tends to be frantic in cities. (A)s cities become more, you know, capitalist, consumerist, materially focussed, they just become less friendly and rushed. I've maxed out, I've rushed too much. I've had my burn out years ahead of my time.... (A) lot of it has to do with being in the city and just being constantly surrounded by the traffic and the rush and the hurry, hurry, hurry. And nobody can wait even three, four seconds, that's too long to wait, they're on the horn and they're yellin', whatever. And **that** is a terrible, terrible world to live in. To be so stressed, and to me, it's impossible to resist, being surrounded by that, and the stress creeps in....*

Reference to a rural environment was often based less on the actual physical qualities of a rural environment, and more an emphasis on a perception that rural life is less stressful, and less regulated than life in cities. Rural people were also perceived to be friendlier than city people. Christine commented:

*(A)ll you could see in the background was the sun and the birds. And when you went to sleep you could see the stars. I've lived in a city for most of my life and you notice the difference. It was a lot calmer and more relaxed. It was very friendly. Because there were so few people around when someone arrived... there was always a conversation...it was nice.*

Some participants maintained that a rural lifestyle appealed to them because rural people seemed to have more control over their lives than city people. Rural people were not bound to the endless rush and routine of a nine-to-five-job. Clive especially appreciated the flexibility a rural lifestyle offered his hosts. As well as working, they were able to plan '*...a few hours a day to spend with your kids or go for a swim.*'

### **3.2 Micro Push Motivation: Avoiding Tourist Places and Other Tourists**

Avoiding tourist places was another strong incentive for research participants to join WWOOF. Rachel stayed away from tourist places because they were too much like a city: '*...it's just a bunch of people who are going really fast, taking lots of pictures and not really breathing it in...*'. Many host farms are located in remote areas, and living on these farms enabled the research participants to enjoy 'tourist free' places, and beautiful natural features that were on these private properties. Clive and Lee also made use of local knowledge to visit places that were not well known tourist attractions.

### **3.3 Micro Push Motivation: Environmental Interests, Values and Politics**

Anahata, Christine, Sam, Rachel and Annie all indicated that they subscribed in some way to 'green' values, which included an awareness about environmental issues and concern about the link between food and health. These values influenced their travel choices, interactions with the places that they travel through, their decision to join WWOOF and their interactions with WWOOF hosts. The link between food and health and an ensuing interest in organic food was often a starting point from which some research participants developed a more general awareness in environmental issues.

Environmental values of some research participants often extended into concerns about social justice issues and global capitalism. What is striking about these research participants is that they were adept at linking local issues with global trends, and used this awareness as a way to inform their travel motivations and choices. Sam commented:

*I became really interested in organics for a number of reasons. One was personal health. I think is always important. But for me, that's the least on the list. The second was social. And by that I mean, there's a lot of world injustice basically, companies will go to third world nation(s) and really strong arm the farmers there into using massive chemical methods.... The person who is growing the food, I don't want them to be pressured to expose themselves, their family to these chemicals. And there's the environment, and the effects that those methods have on the environment, which are huge, multiple, all sorts.... So by supporting the organics industry, I'm encouraging better health in everybody around me.*

In some instances, research participants held a view that the Earth and the non-human communities sustained by the Earth were entities in their own right, and thus deserved to be treated with appropriate respect. Christine joined WWOOF because she wanted to learn how to '...live with as little destructive impact on the environmental surrounds as possible'. Rachel joined WWOOF because she preferred to be in beautiful natural environments. But it also was important for her to be able to 'give something back' to the local communities and the Earth, instead of only 'taking' from them:

*When I go travelling, a lot of the reason behind it is to see the land, and just to have a connection with the Earth. And so I feel that if I'm going and looking..., then I should also give back. And it's when you give, you receive. It's more gratifying, it gets more fulfilling.... (If you stay at farms and ... you're learning and you're giving and you're receiving, then it's just sort of a circle instead of ...something else. It's whole.*

### 3.4 Macro Pull Motivation: The Novelty of Rural Environments

Most research participants joined WWOOF because it allowed them to experience rural lifestyle, which was novel to them because they had lived in cities or towns for their entire lives. The activities associated with rural life (such as milking goats, making cheese, or horse riding) were also novel attractions for these tourists. Annie stated that rural areas were her primary destination in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Cities in Aotearoa/New Zealand did not hold the same potential for novelty: '*...I didn't really come here to stay in Auckland really... or to be in Wellington or to be in a city*'.

### 3.5 Micro Pull Motivation: Meeting Local People, Learning About Another Culture

All of the research participants said that the mainstream backpacking route tended to contain backpackers in a way that prevented them from meeting local residents or visit tourist free spaces. This containment was the very antithesis of their wish to meet local people. They found that they were only meeting the same people (often from their own country of origin) in the hostels as they travelled around the tourist circuits. This was illustrated by Clive, who said:

*When I was travelling... on a bus from hostel to hostel (I was) just kind of meeting the same English people... and just going round this whole circuit, and ...although I've seen a lot of the country I feel as though my experience there...was just kind of on the surface...everything was provided for you as a tourist.*

All participants joined WWOOF because it provided an opportunity for them to escape from the restrictive backpacker circuit, and to meet and live with local residents. Annie observed: '*Going into peoples home.... that's like a character study.... that's the best way to learn about them, to live with them.*' Maria felt that the best way to '*get to know a country*', is if '*...you get to know the people who live in it*'.

Annie welcomed the opportunity to meet people from other cultures on an everyday basis, because it enabled her to learn about them in a way that did not 'objectify' people or their culture:

*That ...would be ... why I'm travelling because.... you can meet people from cultures so it's not such a shock and you're not.... so fascinated with... the cover of someone's culture... that they bring with them...The attraction to another culture is ... shallow because...on a real person level, ...you can't have a relationship with someone else's culture. But that has to do with... putting things on a pedestal and idealism, and that doesn't really work. (WWOOF)...takes another culture off a pedestal because you're living in someone's house and you... see how they live.'*

Most research participants welcomed the opportunity to explore the differences between their culture of origin and that which they encountered in WWOOF homes. For example, Lee observed

that the practice of using honorifics was quite different between New Zealanders and Korean people. Perhaps because his culture of origin was the most starkly different from that of WWOOF hosts, he also mentioned some very mundane day to day cultural practices that the other research participants did not refer to (possibly because their own practices were similar enough to their hosts so as not to notice). Some of Lee's observations included the different ways New Zealanders and Koreans wash dishes, and that New Zealanders stand at a barbecue, and Koreans sit. Lee's comments about the different ways in which Korean people and New Zealanders wash their dishes demonstrates that WWOOF enabled him to participate in very ordinary day to day tasks and experiences which would not have been available to him had he confined his travel experiences to the backpacker circuit.

WWOOF also provided provided access to experiences that would not have been available through the tourism industry. For example, Shuggie participated in a 'stirring', in which the whole neighbourhood turned out to assist with the application of a biodynamic solution on her host's farm. Joyce attended a powhiri, which welcomed a First Nations medicine man onto a local marae, and was also taken sailing around the Bay of Islands by some friends of her hosts. Clive visited the Mystery Creek agricultural show with his host, which was not something he would have ordinarily done if he had remained on the backpacking route. These kinds of activities which provide access to 'real New Zealanders', unusual experiences, and at little or no cost were particularly appreciated by the research participants

### **3.6 Micro Pull Motivation: Cultural Exchange**

Interviews with WWOOF workers indicates that the cultural exchange facilitated by WWOOF can contain elements that not only contribute towards increasing sensitivity towards other cultures (on behalf of the tourist *and* the host), but also extends into a positive contribution to the host community. Sam's observations on his experience of cultural exchange through WWOOF are framed within a commitment to reciprocity:

*Because I came in knowing nothing, or the feeling that I knew nothing, and really I didn't have much to offer as far as knowledge goes. But I do... have labour, I can go in and offer skills, and a brain that works sometimes, and to help out, in that way. So that's what would be my sharing a little bit. But also I've had just, amazing conversations and it takes two people to have a good conversation, so I can go away from that feeling that at least I've shared somewhat, ... sharing a little bit of my world view, and what experience I can from my country to this country... And then there's the sharing I get back, there's obviously the education, and the experience I get being here, getting to meet people. And I think sharing in a more holistic sense, sharing lives. I'm touching their lives, and they're touching my life, and it's a willingness to share your life with somebody else... that real sharing has been wonderful.*

Annie also appreciated the opportunity for cultural exchange, but differed a little from Sam in that she used it to challenge stereotypes commonly held by New Zealanders about her home country:

*Mostly I think that I **teach** people about my culture when I stay on the farms... Just by being who I am, that's something. And a lot of people of people are fascinated by Americans and Hollywood and stuff. I'm sort of dispelling that if I can ...and telling people that they don't actually have to go to LA as their main destination to the States.*

A quality which underlies this kind of positive, reciprocal cultural exchange between WWOOF hosts and WWOOF workers is related to the tendency that cross-cultural empathy is more likely to occur when tourist contact is more than a short and commercial encounter. Unlike conventional tourism, WWOOF hosts and WWOOF workers have the opportunity to spend considerable time with each other. This allows them to explore the differences and similarities between cultures, challenge stereotypes, and uncover subtleties. It also creates opportunities for WWOOF workers to extend cultural exchange beyond increased sensitivity to reciprocity.

### **3.7 Micro Pull Motivation: Belonging and Resting**

The constant challenge of travelling through unfamiliar places can be very tiring. Shuggie and Maria used immersion in the domestic life of WWOOF homes as a way to rest and regain a sense of routine. Shuggie stated *'...it's just nice being in a family environment...being round people who are settled, who are living in this country, and being part of their lives. It's quite nice because it makes you feel more settled'*. Maria in particular found that her lack of affinity with other backpackers left her feeling lonely and unhappy. Not only did she find that she could rest in WWOOF homes, but that she felt more accepted by WWOOF hosts than her (travelling) peers: *'...I was so happy when I stayed at the first place. (I) could settle, and they said, ok, now you're here, you're part of the family, and that was such a great feeling. Because I don't think that I'm a very good traveller, I like settling down'*.

### **3.8 Micro Pull Motivation: Exploring Life Choices and Experimenting with Alternative Lifestyles**

Living and working in WWOOF homes provided a context within which research participants explored life choices and experimented with different lifestyles. The need to explore and experiment with different lifestyles was expressed by some research participants through a deliberate decision to visit place-based 'alternative communities' listed in the WWOOF booklet. In part, this exploration can represent a desire to escape from cities and return to a simpler, romantic way of life, one that is marked by a desire for village-like community. Anahata stated:

*If I had a dream it would be to live out on the land, but close to some sort of urban centre...but at least it would be out. I'd like to live closer to the land, but mixing it with music, and massage and organic farming and good people.*

Research participants used the opportunity to live in WWOOF-listed communities to ascertain whether they could fit into alternative place-based communities, observe how different communities were organised, and determine the advantages and disadvantages of the different ways of organising a community. Sam and Rachel found that visiting place-based communities at different stages of evolution also enabled them to obtain a realistic understanding of the difficulties and challenges of setting up and maintaining a community, and were able to make an informed decision about whether they wanted to live in a place-based community.

### **3.9 Micro Pull Motivation: Seeking Interest-Based Communities**

Research participants not only joined WWOOF to visit place-based communities, but also to seek out a community that shared their interests.<sup>11</sup> Living with and working for people who shared their interests provided a thematic continuity in their travels, and a sense of belonging for these travellers. A concern about environmental issues and organic food was the usual platform upon which these communities of interest were built. Anahata sought a sense of community based on his passion for music and massage. Sam applied his ability to extend his experience of local places and people to a global scale, through his commitment to an interest-based community:

*(T)he other part that really appealed to me was community. I'd much rather meet real New Zealanders and meet (a) real sort of... global neighbourhood perspective, meet people who have the same interests as me, like people who really believe in organic farming.*

The search for connection and belonging within a community of shared interests (and as discussed earlier, place-based communities) illustrate how some backpackers seek to balance transient, superficial 'travel' relationships with ones of more substance and meaning to them.

### **3.10 Micro Pull Motivation: Personal Growth**

Living in WWOOF households provided research participants with opportunities for personal growth and development. Research participants also experienced personal growth or development even it was not an explicitly stated travel motivation. Some of these experiences were of a very practical nature. For instance, Lee found that engaging in WWOOF work he didn't enjoy very much increased his reserves of patience.

Participating in WWOOF proved to be a powerful catalyst for both Maria and Shuggie, as it provided enough structure for them develop a sense of confidence, independence and self-reliance, especially with respect to travelling by themselves. Shuggie said

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<sup>11</sup> WWOOF aims number (4) To improve communication between the organic movement, and (6) To meet interesting people and make useful contacts.

*I think I've just proved something to myself that I am capable of going to a foreign country (although it's English speaking) and getting off a plane and going 'right where I shall go and stay and what shall go and I do?', and just going out and having to get off your backside and find something to do to keep yourself occupied if you haven't got the money to do something, rather than just sitting in a hostel and going 'I've got no money I can't do anything', and actually going out on your own and working in different places and visiting these different places and not feeling like you're strange because you're walking around on your own.*

As well as learning to be patient, Joyce discovered that working for a range of WWOOF hosts who were very different to her taught her to trust that difference was not necessarily threatening. She also learnt to exercise trust in situations she did not always feel comfortable in.

*(O)ne man I was WWOOFing for, he tended give you a hug at night time before you went to bed, and it lasted a bit long for my liking. And I felt uncomfortable, but he was really harmless, and it's relaxing around these kinds of things as well without getting... panicky.*

Joyce found that living in WWOOF households enabled her to develop a sense of empathy and compassion for people, which she did not have prior to her travels or working on WWOOF farms.

*I've learnt that most people mean well. And most people have their own worries and fears and things. Like some people just don't want you to eat the food at all. And I find if people are like that, they've got their own reasons.*

### **3.11 Micro Pull Motivation: Reflection on Life Choices and Issues**

Observing people in different stages of life on a day-to-day basis in WWOOF households enabled research participants to reflect on the issues facing these people, consider their own life choices, and to learn skills which might equip them for a later stage in life. At the time of her interview, Annie was reflecting on issues about ageing. The opportunity to live with older people allowed Annie to observe the long term effect of the life choices these people made, and to consider the future choices she might make for herself, bearing these observations in mind.

Sam appreciated the opportunity to live with WWOOF families, because it exposed him to different kinds of relationships, and ways of bringing up children.

*(A)ctually seeing family dynamics, seeing the way people treat their kids, seeing the way people treat each other and that. I'm very close to my family at home, so that's where I've seen most of it. And my close friends and their relationships, whatever, very few of them are involved long term. So that's why it's very neat to get involved in the family and see the way people interact. And that's a wonderful*

*experience, because you see some things and you think 'I like that, I wanna do that when I have a long term relationship, partner, kids, whatever, I wanna incorporate that.*

Immersion in WWOOF households and talking with WWOOF hosts had a similar effect for Rachel, who noted:

*(N)ow I finally understand that there is so much more than money and cars and business and all these different suits. Things that matter are your family and love and life and your connections, **real** connections.*

### **3.12 Micro Pull Motivation: Learning**

Immersion in local communities and living in WWOOF host households proved to be an effective environment in which backpackers could achieve their learning needs, which varied considerably.

#### **3.12.1 Learning English**

Travelling with the purpose of learning English could be a motivation that is increasing in significance. Two research participants (Lee and Maria) travelled with the express purpose of improving their English speaking skills. Both Lee and Maria recognised the power of language learning in WWOOF households. Lee commented: *'If I learn New Zealander's way of life, I can learn English more easier'*. He also appreciated the opportunity to hear a variety of ways in which English is spoken: *'They speak ...different English to each other. Some people...have a strong accent, some people speak so fast, some people speak too heavy, too light, too soft. I realise women's speaking is easier than men speaking.'* *Women's speaking is faster than men, but clear'*. This is an advantage in that it is unlikely that Lee would experience this exposure to different speaking patterns in a language school, where he would hear English spoken by perhaps only one or two people.

Lee and Maria also appreciated the value of learning English in a situation in which speaking it was compulsory, and living in an everyday environment of a WWOOF home where no other language but English is spoken. This required them to use English all the time, unlike their home situations, (or in formal education environments), where they would speak English only part of the time, and converse with family or other students in their first language for most of their time.

#### **3.12.2 Learning About Self**

Living in WWOOF households often provided opportunities for participants to learn about themselves in ways that were very immediate, and would perhaps have not been available to them if they remained on the mainstream backpacking route. Even participants who did not necessarily explicitly state learning about themselves as a primary motive for travel observed that living in WWOOF households precipitated insights into their own preferences, personalities, or strengths.

After spending a whole week living by herself in a cabin on a Collingwood farm, Annie discovered '*... that I don't like to read Ernest Hemingway's books. That I do really like Grace Jones*'. Christine discovered that living with other WWOOFers was tiring, and that she needed her own 'space' to recuperate from the constant contact with other people. By meeting a wide range of people very different to herself, Rachel realised that she had a capacity to build relationships with people that she had previously not credited herself with. Through engaging in WWOOF work, Clive found that he had unexpected reserves of persistence and patience. Sam, who chose to join WWOOF to explore a rural lifestyle, found that he did enjoy such a life. *(W)hat I've learnt about myself is what I really love.... I've learned that I do love this lifestyle, I've learned that yes, I am very committed to this community, to these ideas.*

### 3.12.3 WWOOF, Learning, and Changing Ideas About The World

Belonging to WWOOF not only reflects some travel motivations, but it can also alter the political awareness of backpackers or encourage a shift in their world view. Rachel joined WWOOF with the intention to learn organic farming and permaculture so she could teach it in developing countries. However, after living and working in WWOOF farms, the emphasis of her political analysis shifted, to refocus on her home country.

*America is one of the **worst** countries... (T)he corporations... go from our country, they just spread this poison around the world, and...then I thought well maybe just going to different countries and teaching... them sustainable agriculture isn't the right tactic. Maybe we should start in my own country and try and stop the core (of destruction).*

Instead of simply being a means by which to learn about organics, WWOOF became for Rachel a site of subversive activity and politics: '*WWOOFing poses a threat, it's a source of education, and education is power, and ultimately it's the people who are the ones that are going to have to change the way things are*'.

Working on WWOOF farms can heighten backpackers awareness of the environment and environmental issues. After spending a week by herself working on an organic farm, Annie found that she wanted to '*make a pact*' with the Earth, and be '*... sensitive to the plants in the rain forest.*' The immediacy of eating the food she had helped grow and working in a farm environment enhanced her knowledge about how the natural environment sustains human life through the production of food.

*(I)t just makes you more aware of places that support life, and... you're aware that (is) important. (B)ecause in the city you're not aware that's important because you don't care because the supermarket supports life. So what difference does it make to you if... a forest is burned.*

Annie also stated that staying on WWOOF farms changed some of her ideas about the nature of food itself.

*'I look at food differently. And cooking goes along with it... and cooking the food that you grow is just amazing.... I learned that you can go out into a garden and eat the weeds that are living there. And that you can eat food that you don't buy at a supermarket'.*

#### **3.12.4 Experiential Environmental Education: Learning about Organic Farming Techniques**

One of the reasons Sam, Christine, Rachel and Anahata joined WWOOF was to learn about alternative lifestyle technologies (such as solar power or wind power) or organic farming techniques. Anahata hoped that WWOOF would help him *'...find my green fingers, if they exist'*. None of these people had any particular skill or skills in mind they wanted to learn when they joined WWOOF. Instead, they conveyed openness to anything they could learn.

If learning organic farming techniques is one way in which people learn about sustainable land use and ecosystems, then it could be regarded as a form of environmental education. A central tenet of environmental education is that at least a portion of environmental education should be experiential, and in the environment itself. Rachel and Anahata especially valued learning about organic growing techniques in a farm environment. Rachel said:

*In school, you're learning the technique, you're learning this and that, and it's very structured. When you're living with people, working with people that have been doing it for years, you have, you have their, like, every farm that you go to is different. Because every property is different, and because of that, you're going to learn completely different techniques. ...When you go to school you're gonna learn that there's one predominant way to do this and that.... It's just not as fun. I learn when I have more fun, I take more in I guess. It's like singing a song or a poem, it sticks better.*

A unique aspect of the learning experiences offered by WWOOF is that it exposes workers to issues about organic farming that extends beyond organic farming techniques. Workers are able to observe the emotional commitment that is required to develop an organic property, and the different ways farmers either create, or avoid, 'burnout'. Some of their idealism and romanticism about rural lifestyles was stripped away when they discovered just how much commitment and hard work is required to develop an organic property. Christine commented: *'I've learnt that it's not at all an easy option to be sustainable - you don't have the creature comforts which you usually have'*. Whilst these observations did not seem to discourage the research participants from organic farming or a rural lifestyles entirely, it certainly led them to review their own plans with a changed, more realistic perspective.

### 3.13 Micro Pull Motivation: The Need for Activity

Most research participants joined WWOOF because it allowed them to take part in activities, rather than simply "look" at places or people. Lee expresses this succinctly: *'They (mainstream tourists) want to see, watch, but I don't want that, I want to do. For example, in Abel Tasman Park, or Milford Sound track, they use cruise, but I don't want to do that, I want more activity'*. Through his preference for activity, Lee tended to focus on activities available on WWOOF farms that were similar to conventional recreational tourism activities such as fishing for crayfish, scuba diving and driving motorbikes.

Shuggie found that WWOOF work satisfied her more than adventure tourism activities, which she did not consider to be particularly fulfilling.

*Bungy jump for example,...it lasts a couple of seconds, costs a packet, and then it's over and done with... you've done it, and you come out and ...you just feel really...deflated afterwards - you know you've built yourself up to do a thing and you do it and then its like 'oh I've done it now' that's it, finished, in a couple of seconds. Whereas here, you get a bit of exercise as well, you get up in the morning you're actually doing something. Sometimes you're out in the fresh air, sometimes you're inside, and it's manual work, you're actually **doing** something rather than paying to jump off a bridge or float down a river.*

### 3.14 An Overview Of Travel Motivations

As illustrated above, workers join WWOOF for many reasons. The majority of travel motivations relevant to backpackers joining WWOOF are micro pull motivations. However, macro push and pull travel motivations, and micro push motivations are no less significant. The categories used to determine travel motivations of backpackers do not necessarily convey their complexity. Each research participant had their own unique set of travel motivations, which varied in number. These interrelationships can influence the interactions between WWOOF workers and WWOOF hosts. The existence of such interrelationships implies that each backpacker will enter a WWOOF home with a unique, sophisticated set of needs, which may or may not be met by WWOOF hosts. To a certain degree, this will determine the "success" of the time spent by backpackers in WWOOF homes.

A general level of analysis reveals that there are two different 'kinds' of WWOOFers. All research participants shared one travel motivation in common, and this was to meet and live with 'New Zealanders'. One 'type' of WWOOFer is specifically interested in environmental issues, which is usually accompanied by a political analysis of, and a need to escape from, industrial urbanised societies and their economic systems. They specifically seek out farms that pursue alternative lifestyles and employ organic farming techniques.

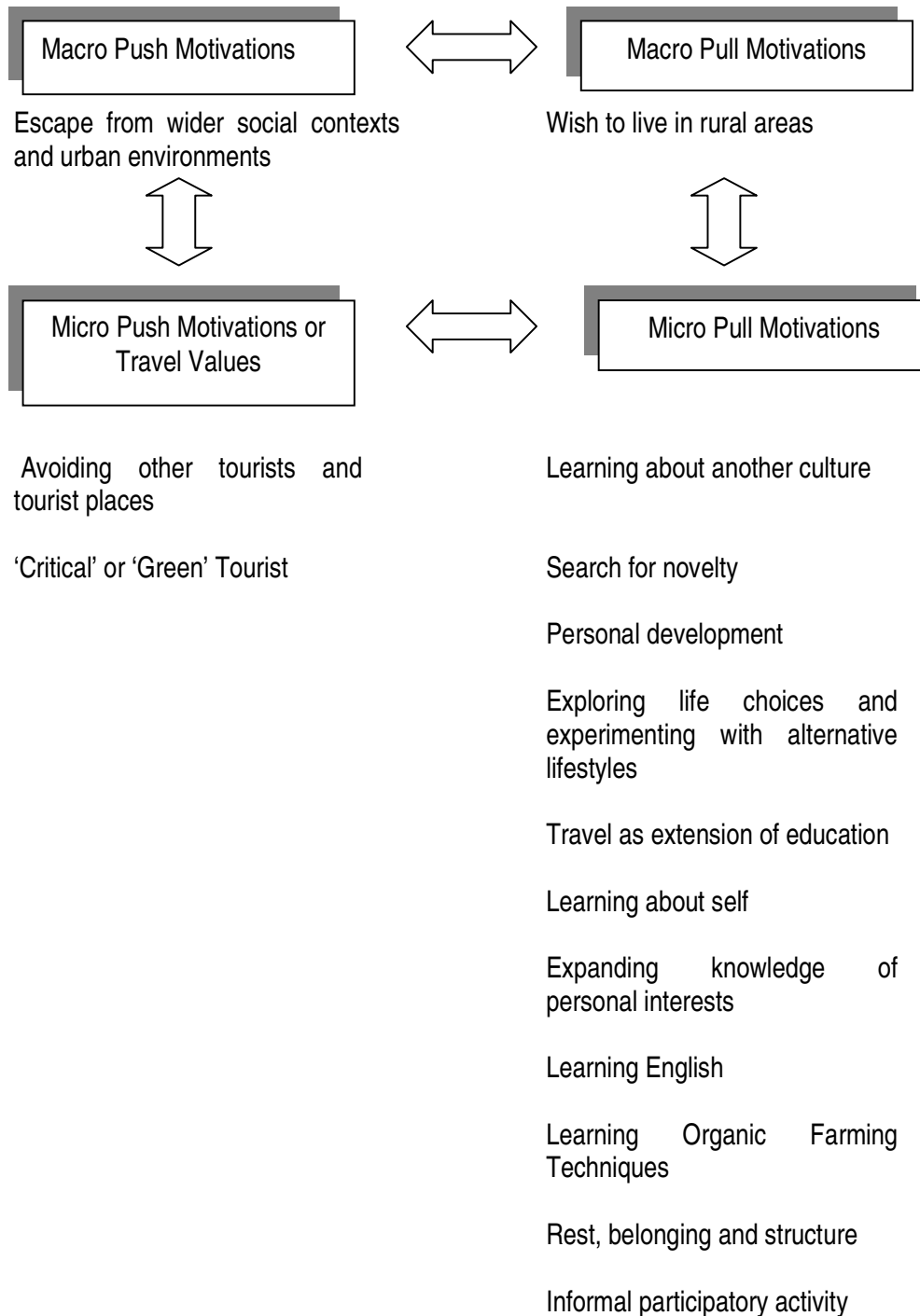
The other 'type' of WWOOFer does not have the same critical political analysis. Instead, they are more like 'mainstream' backpackers, because they emphasise a preference for recreational

activities, or the desire to experience novel activities. However, even though they did not express a dislike for cities, or extend their analysis into wider political and cultural conditions, these backpackers distance themselves from mainstream backpackers (and other tourists) by stating that they did not like 'partying', and/or that mainstream backpackers were not necessarily interested in learning about other cultures.

It must be noted that the above categorisation of the two different kinds of WWOOFers is very simplistic, and that each backpacker belonging to WWOOF will be unique in their attitudes and motivations towards WWOOF.

The diagram below represents a distillation of the travel motivations most pertinent to backpacker participation in WWOOF.

**Figure 1: Backpacker Travel Motivations and WWOOF**



## 4 How Backpackers Choose Farms

Backpackers decisions to stay on particular WWOOF are influenced by a myriad of reasons, including locations of farms and particular travel motivations. However, the descriptions of each farm in the WWOOF booklet were the most significant influence on backpacker choice of farms. In general, the more information provided about a farm and its hosts, the more inclined backpackers were to consider the farm as a potential place to visit. This due to either one or both of the following reasons. Firstly, backpackers who are travelling on a tight budget are not able to spend a great deal of money on toll calls. Therefore they are more likely to choose farms that they are able to find as much about as possible before they 'invest' in a phone call. Secondly, visiting and living with people who are essentially strangers can be a risk. The information provided by host farmers enabled backpackers to (a) assess if staying on a particular farm was likely to meet a range of travel motivations/ needs, (b) ascertain if they shared any similarities with the hosts, and what kinds of differences they were likely to encounter, and (c) if they were likely to be compatible with their hosts. Farms that had very brief descriptions only were less likely to be contacted.

Backpackers 'shopped' for host farms over the telephone. The initial contact made between a potential host and a backpacker over the telephone was also an important influence on backpacker choice of farms. A host with an open, friendly, and welcoming telephone manner appealed to all backpackers interviewed. Some research participants found that it was useful to communicate their expectations (e.g. wanting to learn about organic farming) very clearly. This was done in an effort to make sure that their stay on the farm was mutually satisfying. In general, the more information that was shared over the phone between the backpacker and the host farmer before the backpacker arriving on the farm, the more successful the visit.

WWOOF workers also paid heed to word of mouth recommendations from other WWOOFers - both on farms to avoid, and farms to make a point of visiting.

Research participants picked farms that appealed to long held, specific interests, such as organic farming, alternative technologies, or music. In some instances a description of a farm in a WWOOF booklet piqued their curiosity. These descriptions usually involved some kind of novel activity or characteristic, such as the opportunity to make organic relishes, or to work with rare breeds of domestic animals. Descriptions that emphasised a sense of being included in daily life of the household woven through with a range of (often very simple) leisure activities (such as swimming at the local beach) were also very attractive to backpackers.

Some backpackers had heard that certain areas in New Zealand/Aotearoa had very beautiful scenery, such as Golden Bay or the West Coast of the South Island, and wanted to combine visiting these areas with living on WWOOF farms. Areas such as the Coromandel and Golden Bay also appealed to participants who had heard that these areas were popular with people who were living 'alternative lifestyles'. Some picked a place simply because it was convenient to where they were travelling through at the time. This was often weighed up against the accessibility of the farm. If backpackers had their own transport, the remoteness of an area was generally not an issue. However, if they were travelling by public transport, the final decision as to whether to visit a farm

was determined if they would be able to reach this particular destination within a reasonable time frame and cost.

Other factors that influence backpacker choice of farms included:

- Accommodation separate from the host's household did not appeal to some backpackers, as it implied a separation from the daily household life of the farm. Conversely, some backpackers preferred to have their own 'space' for a portion of the day, and did not mind living in separate accommodation.
- Diet. Backpackers who preferred a vegetarian diet avoided farms owned by hosts who stated that meat was part of their diet. Some vegetarians also avoided working on farms that raised cattle or sheep, due a difference in values about eating meat, and farming animals for human consumption.
- Organic status. Some backpackers deliberately sought out farmers which stated that organic farming principles were important to farm management. Others who were not particularly interested in organic food or issues directly related to organic farming deliberately chose not to work on farms that made organic farming principles an explicit part of the description of the farm. This choice was based on a desire to not disappoint or mislead host farmers, or to deprive other WWOOF workers who were interested in organics of a place on such a farm.
- Number of other WWOOFers. One research participant preferred to stay on farms that had more than one WWOOF worker, as it provided further opportunities for socialising.
- Some of the women who were travelling by themselves preferred to stay on farms that were hosted by a couple or a family, rather than on farms that were hosted by single men.

#### **4.1 Some Feedback on the WWOOF Booklet.**

In general, backpackers were very satisfied with the WWOOF (New Zealand) booklet, in terms of the information provided and the general format of the booklet. Anahata (who had WWOOFed in other parts of the world, and therefore viewed other WWOOF books) stated that it was the best WWOOF booklet he had seen.<sup>12</sup> Clive appreciated the explanations about organic gardening, and biodynamic principles.

Some minor suggestions for improving the design of the booklet included;

- Using a different font, such as courier.
- If possible, use different coloured pages for different regions.
- Link the different WWOOF regions with names, e.g. Region One is Northland.
- A small amount of information about the different regions (e.g. geography, special cultural attractions<sup>13</sup>) would be helpful so that WWOOF workers can prioritise their regions of choice.

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<sup>12</sup> He also observed that exploring WWOOF on the Internet in general could be very confusing, as there was no one clear, 'authorised' site or list for certain countries. He would prefer to use one WWOOF website only, with authorised links to all the different countries.

<sup>13</sup> e.g. Golden Bay's reputation for 'alternative' lifestyles

- Introduce a code that indicates which farms are commercially orientated, and which farms are not.
- Introduce a code which indicates the organic status of each farm. This is especially important for WWOOFers who are interested in organic farming.

Backpackers appreciated descriptions of farms which outlined the following characteristics of host households:

- Diet
- Type of accommodation; whether it is separate from the house, or if the worker has to share a bedroom.
- Smoking/Non smoking.
- Type of WWOOF tasks expected to be undertaken by the worker (including seasonal bias).
- Recreational and leisure activities available on the farm.
- Proximity to town.
- Description of surrounding area.

## 5 WWOOF Work

It is important to examine backpackers experiences of WWOOF work for two reasons. Firstly, it challenges the idea of travel and holidays as being a recreational experience only. Secondly, WWOOF work can also be a source of conflict between WWOOF workers and WWOOF hosts. WWOOF work therefore deserves some attention, as it can strongly influence the experience of backpackers as WWOOF workers.

Travel based solely on recreational or leisure needs is not necessarily constructive or satisfying for some backpackers (especially those who are travelling for long periods of time). Interviews with the research participants revealed that WWOOF work held a variety of different meanings. In some cases these meanings can be linked to their travel motivations and experiences. The following discussion outlines some of those meanings.

### 5.1 WWOOF Work and Saving Money

Whilst WWOOF workers do not earn a wage, most research participants mentioned that the exchange of food and board for work influenced the duration of the time they spent travelling. This was due to the savings they made on money they would have been required to spend on food or accommodation if they had not been WWOOFing. Saving money in this fashion had a number of effects. Firstly, it allowed participants to spend money on what they perceived to be 'luxury' items (such as a chocolate bar, alcohol, or going to the cinema). Secondly, it allowed participants to extend their travel time in New Zealand because their accommodation and food costs were significantly reduced. Thirdly, at the time of her interview, Joyce was considering further travel through Europe because WWOOFing had enabled her to save money she had budgeted for her current trip.

### 5.2 Travel, Work, and Routine

Shuggie and Maria both welcomed the opportunity to work because it gave them a sense of structure and routine that they did not experience whilst they were travelling. This indicates that for some, the freedom and lack of responsibility of long haul travel does not always contribute to their sense of happiness and well-being. This is exacerbated especially if the traveller has little money to spend on activities that would otherwise provide them with structure and stimulation. Shuggie's explanation of why she likes to work when she is travelling draws on an experience that is not dissimilar to the effects of being unemployed.

*I think it's the whole thing about giving yourself a reason to get up in the morning. If you stay in a hostel and you haven't got much money and you lie in bed and you think and you get up around midday. (Y)ou actually see people doing that when you go to some hostels. (T)hey just sit in front of the TV all day because they haven't got any money. (But) out here (on WWOOF farms) you're actually doing something.*

Maria's enjoyment of WWOOF work was also partly related to the fact that it enabled her to maintain or enhance a distinction between leisure time and working time. This in turn reinforced the value of rest and relaxation:

*I enjoyed... working outside, like shovelling sheep shit, collecting seaweed on the beach, and picking the apples in the sunshine. I really enjoyed working and then feeling a bit exhausted in the evening, have dinner and then sit there with a glass of wine and talking and the children all around us.*

Through WWOOF work, Maria found that she could create niches of distinct leisure time within the broader context of the duration of her travel.

### **5.3 Work and Belonging**

In conjunction with Maria's appreciation of being part of the everyday life of a family she found that work enhanced her sense of belonging and being valued within the family:

*Working... was a great aspect too, because I had something important to do. People needed me to do something, so I had a certain position in the family, or in the farm as well. So I wasn't just travelling around and indulging myself and being lazy ... also I had things to do. That was good.*

### **5.4 Work as Personal Development**

Clive appreciated WWOOF work as it provided him with an opportunity to expand his practical skills, because he was concerned that his only employable skills were related to office work or practising law. He also used WWOOF work to challenge a long held self-perception that he was not able to undertake work that was more of a manual nature. '*I wanted to prove to myself...that I could do things, I could fix things*'. Subsequently, he gained a lot of satisfaction out of building some steps down a steep slope to a caravan, as this task both expanded his practical skills and changed his self-perception.

WWOOF work also engendered in Clive a dynamic engagement with the environment surrounding him. One of his tasks was to assist his host in liming an olive orchard, and he spent some time at an agricultural show at Mystery Creek learning about how orchards are limed. He then spent a day working in the orchard itself, putting into practical use the information garnered at Mystery Creek.

Joyce found that WWOOF work challenged her in a slightly different way. For most of the younger research participants, manual labour was a novelty for them. However, as an older traveller, Joyce had spent many more years in the work force in a variety of jobs, and regarded manual labour with less enthusiasm. Her return to this kind of labour made her realise that she was still capable of physical work, and that she could tolerate it. WWOOF work served to strengthen Joyce's sense of self-confidence, and retain her capacity to apply herself to manual labour.

## 5.5 Work and Learning

Work was also important for Anahata, and this was linked to his perception that his period of long-term travel was not a time that was constituted solely of rest and recreation. Instead, it was a *lifestyle* that incorporated work, which in turn provided him with a context in which he could engage in his environment in ways other than a need to rest and recreate. Anahata used WWOOF work especially to learn. He delighted in being exposed to novel experiences through WWOOF work. Not only did he learn how to bake bread on a WWOOF farm, but also how to herd goats!

## 5.6 Reclaiming Work

WWOOF work enabled Annie to temporarily avoid taking low skill, low paid employment that she did not enjoy. It also allowed her to reclaim work as an activity that was infused with meaning, creativity, and joy:

*I think that when you're putting ... care into (WWOOF work) you ...can reach an elated state that I don't reach when I'm working in a café bar. I put care into planting things because I know I'm going to eat them. Or I know that...stuff has already been planted by other people that care, and I'm eating that...I can't care about making someone an espresso or a cappuccino. It doesn't come naturally to me... but I can care about making things for other people that I know, for people in my environment.*

## 5.7 Work, Decommodification, and Reciprocity

A fundamental characteristic of WWOOF which energises and sustains WWOOF is the exchange of labour for food and accommodation. Farmers do not earn a direct income through providing these services, and workers do not earn an income through their labour. Money is not used to facilitate or quantify this exchange, and 'value' is instead reframed in terms of reciprocity.

Research participants differed a little in their ideas about a reciprocal exchange. All of the research participants said that they were happy to work for their hosts because they perceived it to be fundamental to the reciprocal relationship shared between the worker and host (Wearing, 1997). Reciprocity is usually regarded in terms of a contract between individuals. Clive illustrated this commitment to reciprocity with the following comment:

*It's great, it's brilliant. (WWOOF) has given me so much, it's fantastic. I feel really grateful to these people. It's not so much that they've given me board and lodgings, they've given me so much else as well. The first people would take me off to the parks and the beaches with the kids.... (A)s long as I feel as though I've given something back, it's fair enough.*

Research participants were very clear on what they considered to be the fundamental qualities essential to a fair exchange for their work. All shared the expectation that farmers would supply them with the minimum requirements of safe and comfortable accommodation, and food of adequate quantity and quality. However, they especially appreciated it if a host farmer made the effort to include them in their day to day life, such as sharing meals with them, including them in family activities, and taking them to local attractions. Maria commented:

*It's ... very important that the farmers try to get a personal relationship to the workers. Not that they just say 'there's your room, tomorrow you work this and that and then we might have dinner together but then I don't care about you'. So that they really try to make the WWOOFer feel part of the farm.*

A common response to this kind of hospitality was to draw on a strong work ethic. The majority of the research participants indicated that they were willing to work for much longer than four hours a day if they perceived the exchange was fair, or generous on behalf of the host. Some also mentioned they felt uncomfortable if their hosts did not require them to do any work, and would either ask for work to do, or use their initiative to find work.

Experiencing hospitality and a cultural exchange based on a positive personal relationship with the hosts was important for all research participants, and it was this quality that proved to be the fulcrum on which their experience as WWOOF workers was balanced. If the host included them in their day to day life, then workers felt that they were meeting a primary travel motivation, which was to meet and live with members of another culture. If they were not included in the day to day life of the host, then their experience of a host farm was sometimes stripped back to that of work only, and a sense of being 'used' as cheap labour. This in turn served to diminish or detract from their travel experiences as a whole. In instances like these, some research participants said they would prefer to engage in paid work, since they perceived they would be getting a fairer deal out of this kind of commodified exchange.

A lack of hospitality was not the only way in which workers experienced the feelings of being used as cheap labour. Some hosts did not supply them with food that they considered to be of adequate quantity or quality.

At least half of the research participants indicated that they deliberately avoided visiting, or working on commercial farms, as they perceived that the hosts who ran these kinds of farms made a profit out of not paying for their labour. This had the effect of removing the reciprocal nature of work by neutralising the good will shared between the host and the worker, and introducing the notion of extracting a quantified value from each other. Clive observed:

*Once you throw all that sort of thing into the equation its starts to become 'you're there and you're doing your work for your food' and 'I've done four hours work and I want my dinner' as opposed to just being 'Hi, thanks for doing me a favour and thanks for doing **me** a favour sort of thing...' I'd rather if I can avoid going to those sort of places.*

## 5.8 WWOOF Work and Choosing A WWOOF Host

Whilst most research participants found that their experiences of WWOOF work was on the whole positive, they also found that there were aspects of WWOOF work that they sought to avoid, or that it detracted from, or altered their travel experiences.

Research participants often decided to avoid hosts who stated in the WWOOF booklet that WWOOF workers must be 'prepared to work hard', without mentioning some kind of leisure or recreational activity that balanced or offset such hard work. Some research participants also avoided farms where they perceived they might have to do very heavy manual work, such as working on cattle farms or scrub cutting. Joyce decided to avoid working on dairy farms, because she did not want to get up at 4:30am to milk cows. In addition, despite being a skilled cook, Joyce chose not to reveal these skills to her hosts, as she did not want them to be abused.

Lee, who stated a preference for the opportunity to experience activities on WWOOF farms that mirrored more 'traditional' commodified tourism activities found that he did not like WWOOF work, because it was 'boring'. He also discovered that some places (farms and backpackers) did not advertise in the WWOOF booklet and offered a similar exchange of accommodation and food, but did not expect him to work as hard as WWOOF hosts. These places were also more likely to provide the leisure activities that he was interested in, such as learning how to use a shotgun, or riding motorbikes.

Whilst all research participants were prepared to undertake menial work, they much preferred undertake a range of menial tasks throughout the day, rather than doing the same job for hours or days at an end. As a result, descriptions of farms which indicated that they were able to structure the workday around a variety of tasks tended to be more appealing to backpackers.

In an effort to avoid a sense of being exploited through WWOOF work research participants usually chose their farms carefully. The selection was most often based on the description that hosts submitted to the WWOOF booklet. Hosts who appeared attractive to research participants were those who offered an environment in which workers could counter WWOOF work with opportunities to have fun or relax. Annie demonstrated this process when she said '*...you just look for something... comforting... and you go with that. Like, 'rest and re-creation'.*

The process by which research participants choose the farms they want to live and work on represents the starting point of an active negotiation of travel experiences whereby work is carefully balanced with opportunities to have fun or relax. The way in which backpackers select the farms they wish to visit demonstrates that recreation and leisure needs are significant to these tourists. For the host-guest relationship to be a successful one, it is important that host farmers take these recreational and relaxation needs into account, as well as expecting an appropriate exchange of labour from their WWOOF workers.

## 6 A Challenge for WWOOF

The central 'marketing' theme of WWOOF is the opportunity to stay on farms that employ organic farming techniques or alternative lifestyle technologies. This theme can create expectations in backpackers that all farmers will be committed to and practising organic farming techniques. Sam discovered to his dismay that this was not the case, and that some farmers did not appear to be interested in organic farming techniques or organic food at all. This confirms Campbell's (1999) hunch that some WWOOF hosts are not using organic growing techniques. Sam's disappointment influenced his WWOOF experiences in two ways. Firstly, he was not able to satisfy his need to learn about organics. Secondly, he felt that because farmers were not interested in organic farming, or teaching him about organic farming, he was being 'used' as cheap labour. Sam's disappointment was shared by at least two other research participants.

The issues discussed above reveals two qualities of WWOOF as a model of decommodified tourism. Firstly, it illustrates how each different backpacker will bring a set of unique travel motivations, expectations and needs to their WWOOFing experience. These influence what they perceive to be a fair exchange between the host farmer and the worker. For Sam, a fair exchange required exposure to organic farming techniques and a willingness on behalf of the farmer to teach him these techniques.

Secondly, one aspect of WWOOF as a model of decommodified tourism is that host farmers are not required to meet any particular set of 'standards' as hosts, or provide standardised information about themselves, what they provide for their workers and what actually happens on their properties. Andrew and Jane Strange observe that they cannot 'make' WWOOF hosts provide certain information in the WWOOF booklet, or agree to a basic set of rules about being a WWOOF host.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they can only suggest such standards, which hosts may or may not choose to pay heed to.

Because WWOOF hosts are not required to meet a certain set of standards as tourism providers or of organic farming status, workers are exposed to a wide variety of living and working conditions, host values and organic/non-organic farming practises. This is usually considered by the research participants as a boon. However, when worker expectations created by the central marketing theme of WWOOF (the organic status of farms) are disappointed by being hosted by non-organic farms, this kind of variety can be considered as detracting from their travel experience, and the authority of WWOOF as a whole.

WWOOF hosts can therefore fulfil some travel motivations and ignores others. This demonstrates that even this relatively 'extreme' form of decommodified tourism must respond adequately to tourist motivations and values in order to satisfy its 'customers'. Successful decommodification of tourism must therefore find a careful balance between tourism being beneficial for host communities, and adequately meeting a range of backpacker travel motivations and needs.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Jane and Andrew Strange, April 2000.

## **7 An Ideal Farm From a Worker Point of View**

In general, there are two essential elements which underlie backpackers positive experiences of staying on WWOOF farms. Firstly, tourists who are working as volunteers should ideally be provided with opportunities to satisfy the range of needs generated by their travel motivations. Voluntary work especially should be balanced with the need to learn, have fun and relax. Clear communication between host farmer and backpacker is an important process by which the two different parties determine the needs and wants of the other, and if there is potential for those wants and needs to be satisfied on a mutual basis. Secondly, special attention should be paid to encouraging hosts to provide hospitality which embraces the inclusion of tourists/volunteers in the everyday social life of the household, rather than a purely functional relationship of providing food and accommodation.

Another quality of WWOOF which ensures its success overall is that there is a huge diversity of host farms available for backpackers with a wide range of motivations and needs to choose from. What does not suit one worker on one farm will suit another on the same farm. Conversely, different workers will meet the needs of different farmers.

The model of an ideal WWOOF farm outlined below was developed using responses from the research participants when I asked them to explain what they thought was a 'good host farm'. I also asked them to describe what qualities they thought a 'good WWOOF worker' should have.

### **A Good Host Farm**

#### **Escape from Urban, Industrialised Environments/Avoiding Other Tourists and Tourist Places.**

**Ideal Farm:** Rural area. Often remote. Opportunities to indulge in nostalgia, return to simple living.

#### **Exploring Life Choices and Search for Novelty.**

**Ideal Farm:** Exposure to rural lifestyle and alternative lifestyles/communities.

#### **Immersion in Everyday Life of Host Culture.**

**Ideal Farm:** Hospitality and cultural exchange, inclusion in family life.

Adequate food and lodgings.

Interest-based communities. Place-based communities.

#### **Interrelationship Between Immersion in Everyday Life of Host Culture and Other Travel Motivations**

**Ideal Farm:** Opportunities for personal development of the tourist

Opportunities for rest and a sense of belonging.

Opportunities to learn

Reflection on life choices and issues through exposure to new experiences and different people

### **Preference for Informal, Participatory Activity.**

**Ideal Farm:** Exposure to new activities through work and hospitality. Balance between work and relaxation.

Work as informal, participatory activity provides opportunities for;

- Personal development
- Learning

Varied work is very important, as well as a degree of flexibility with respect to when the work is done.

### **Environmental Awareness/Wanting to Learn Organics.**

**Ideal Farm:** Commitment to organic practices, and adequate organic status.

Willingness to teach organic farming techniques.

## **A GOOD WORKER**

### **Immersion in Everyday Life of Host Culture.**

**Ideal Worker:** Fit into the household. Obey household rules. Co-operate with other WWOOFers. Be sensitive to relationship dynamics within the household.

### **Interrelationship Between Immersion in Everyday Life of Host Culture and Other Travel Motivations**

**Ideal Worker:** Personal Development: Be open to, and tolerant of difference. Be willing to change perceptions.

The need to learn: Be willing to learn and open to new experiences.

### **Preference for Activity (Work as a Fulfilling Activity).**

**Ideal Worker:** Be a Willing Worker! Be prepared to work at (sometimes) menial tasks. Be reliable, honest and flexible.

**Commitment to Environmental or Social Justice Issues OR Reciprocity as an Individual Contract.**

**Ideal Worker:** Be a Willing Worker! Be prepared to work at (sometimes) menial tasks in return for board and lodging.

**Wanting to Learn Organic Farming Techniques.**

**Ideal Worker: (primarily for farmers who are committed to, and prioritise organic farming practices):** Be willing to learn about environmental issues and organic farming techniques.

## 8 WWOOF and the Future

Despite its long-term success as an organisation that effectively provides services for a certain group of tourists, I believe that WWOOF will remain on the fringe of the tourism industry. This is due to the very quality that underlies its success. Relationships between the host and tourist are not standardised or sanitised into standards of service, food, accommodation, and tourism activities that would be associated with the 'quality' required of commodified tourism. The lack of commodification and the contractual obligations that underlie commodified tourism ensures hosts retain power in their own homes, and are not obliged to provide those services to commodified 'standards'. WWOOF maintains a dimension of informality which perhaps appeals to a small part of the tourism market only. The majority of tourists may continue to demand visual spectacle, and a certain kind of service and tourism products. The need to rest, relax and recreate also ensures that the bulk of tourism continues to be based primarily on leisure needs. The requirements of WWOOF members to work four hours a day contradicts and challenges those leisure needs, and tourists who are prepared to take part in WWOOF are likely to remain in the minority.

The negative impacts of commodified tourism (and ecotourism) affect human communities and the environment both on local and global scales. As a model of decommodified ecotourism, WWOOF challenges and addresses some of those impacts, and at the same time satisfies a whole raft of travel motivations and needs (Wearing, 1997, 1998). In addition, backpackers who are travelling on an especially low budget are able to contribute to economies that do not include commodified tourism products or businesses, and communities who do not necessarily host tourists.

I do not wish to suggest that WWOOF is a panacea for the negative impacts of ecotourism, or tourism in general. Instead, WWOOF may be worthwhile exploring as a niche tourism 'product', which can draw on an ever-changing backpacker market, by appealing to tourists who wish to meet and live with members of host communities, and/or travel in a way which fits not only with their budget, but also their own political/environmental values. Similar models may be established in other countries to benefit communities who may be otherwise adversely affected by mainstream tourism. If carefully operationalised and managed, tourism based on travel motivations and practices discussed by this case study has the potential to contribute to building community, and caring for the environment, both on a local and a global level.

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