

Wwoofing in New Zealand as alternative mobility and lifestyle

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New Zealand's main target market for tourism is the 'interactive traveller', these are defined as travellers "who seek out new, authentic experiences that involve engagement with natural and cultural environments ... and they are very interested in interacting with people" (Ministry of Tourism, 2007: 20). This reflects the importance that the New Zealand government ascribes to the economic benefits of backpacking and the significance of low-key developments as a possible strategy towards sustainability.

However, backpackers in NZ are increasingly providing new interpretations of the term 'interactive traveller' as they are crossing the boundaries between conventional backpacking (following conventional monetarised exchanges for food and accommodation) and Wwoofing (alternative, non-monetarised exchange).

What is Wwoofing?

'Working Weekends on Organic Farms' (Wwoof) was set up in 1971 as an opportunity for Londoners to work on surrounding farms on weekends and therefore to engage with and support the organic movement. This enabled city-dwellers to connect with their food source specifically and the countryside more generally, as epitomized by Sue Coppard, the founder of Wwoof: "London in the 70s was very swinging - but I desperately missed being able to get out to the countryside. I thought that if I offered to help out on a farm, they would let me stay" (Coppard, 2006). When the demand for lon-

ger periods on farms occurred, the name was changed from 'Working Weekends on Organic Farms' to 'Willing Workers On Organic Farms'. Since then, in recognition of the world wide nature of the organisation and the confusion caused by the word 'work' with migrant workers which Wwoofers are most definitely not, Wwoof now stands for 'World Wide Opportunities On Organic Farms'.

In essence, Wwoofing emerged from a desire to engage with the organic food movement and is now seen as a good way to increase the awareness of alternative solutions to industrial agriculture and at the same time to act as conduit for a transfer of knowledge within and outside the movement. Wwoof is an exchange relationship between the host – who provides food, accommodation and educational opportunities – and the Wwoofer – who in return undertakes between four to six hours manual labour per day.

Since the first organized outing in 1971, consisting of Sue Coppard and

two other Wwoofers, Wwoofing organizations have been established in 42 countries and independent hosts can be found in a further 54 countries. So, there are ample opportunities for international Wwoofing experiences. A recent article in a UK daily newspaper even listed the ten best places to Wwoof in Europe (Katz, 2009), so wwoofing seems to be moving towards the mainstream. The act of Wwoofing has gone beyond the initial ideal of education and awareness raising of organic production as backpackers now utilise the opportunities as a cheap way of travelling and experiencing place. It is not uncommon for backpackers to switch between stints of Wwoofing and conventional paid work (often as temporary workers in vineyards, orchards etc.) in order to maximize their travel budget.

Wwoofing in NZ

In New Zealand, Wwoof started in 1974 with 6 organic farms, but the phenomenon has since expanded considerably in

Discovering new wildlife on the farm.



All Pics: Jan Mosedale

popularity: 613 hosts were listed by the organisation in 2001, 802 in 2003 (McIntosh and Bonnemann, 2006) compared to 1,124 in 2009. While McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) give detailed numbers for Wwoofers (3,700 in 2001 and 5,850 in 2003), it is not possible to determine the actual number of Wwoofers as backpackers pick up copies of the list from other backpackers at hostels and take advantage of Wwoofing opportunities without officially becoming a member.

A quantitative analysis of demographics undertaken by McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) demonstrates similar characteristics between Wwoofers and backpackers in NZ: 93.5% of Wwoofers are young (86.9% are between the ages of 16-34) international visitors (USA: 17.9%, Germany: 17.6%, the United Kingdom: 17.2% and Japan: 10.2%) and mostly students (43.3%). Interestingly, a vast majority (91.7%) of NZ Wwoofers gained their first Wwoofing experience on the NZ trip, which suggests that information about Wwoofing is passed word-of-mouth between backpackers. McIntosh & Bonnemann (2006) report that Wwoofers had varied reasons for joining Wwoof New Zealand: 40.5% education about organic farming, 32.0% to experience NZ life, 31.1% travel around NZ, 15.7% to experience life on a farm, 11.2% to experience alternative lifestyles.

Wwoofing as alternative mobility

The quantitative aspects of Wwoofing cannot explain the continuing success of the phenomenon. Also, simplifying the exchange to a rational transaction of labour for food and accommodation does not take other socio-economic factors into account. According to Crewe (2000: 283-284) "... exchange is seldom simply an 'unembedded', material, commodity transaction. Rather, it is a richly symbolic activity which can have important emotional consequences quite apart from any material changes which may result". Of course this is even more so in the case of Wwoofing as success of the transaction (for both partners) depends on the interactions between hosts and Wwoofers. The following section presents the preliminary findings of a research project that aims to demonstrate how the practice of Wwoofing produces alternative mobile economic spaces. Data was gathered using a combination of semi-structured interviews and brief auto-ethnographic research, which was undertaken over a period of two weeks in two of New Zealand's main agrarian areas that rely heavily on seasonal labour, Hawkes Bay and Bay of Plenty.

There is no qualifying criteria for hosts other than being organic and even that is a matter of interpretation, as a host with an organic veggie garden would qualify as being able to provide education in organic growing techniques. In addition, Wwoof NZ is also listing hosts that only offer cultural exchange opportuni-

ties. Hosts are involved (and use Wwoofers) in a number of diverse operations (e.g. commercial farms/orchards, not-for-profit Trusts, small-holdings, veggie gardens, art workshops, Buddhist meditation centres, intentional communities etc.). According to the type of operation there is a different emphasis on the exchange. For some hosts, the emphasis lies on cheap, flexible labour without the need for bureaucratic involvement: "I run the [business], and all I see is work out there, and so its, I just think, how am I going to do that, I need a hand, and so you know bringing people in the house is one of the solutions for me to you know get on top of some of the work" (Hamish). Whereas other see the benefit in being able to create a certain alternative lifestyle with their Wwoofers: "And you know its really nice, you feel that like your almost travelling again because your sitting around a table with people from different cultures and talking to them you know for hours on what their country is like and their experiences" (Betty). Wwoofers can be part of the lifestyle, as explained by Betty or they can facilitate an alternative lifestyle, which would not be possible without an extra pair of hands.

In some cases, the interaction with Wwoofers re-enforces the hosts decision to follow an alternative/organic path: "And when people come and want to work, are willing its just fantastic, its really really good. Its almost unbelievable at times you know this way some people have been, its really fantastic" (Louise). Hosts may draw energy and hope from Wwoofers as their enthusiasm re-affirms their decision to be different from the mainstream and engage in the struggle towards sustainable farming or sustainable living: "I mean just being with those two [Wwoofers] is rewarding, its incredible. Yeah ... seeing peoples enthusiasm and what they want to do" (Hayley). Conversely, hosts demonstrate to their Wwoofers that an organic and/or alternative lifestyle is possible.

Motivations of Wwoofers are similarly varied with some using it merely as a cheap way to travel around New Zealand without real interest in learning about organic practices, whereas for others the interaction with the hosts or other Wwoofers is the key to a successful experience. This interaction is how knowledge about organic practices is



Trip to picnic with host



Host and Wwoofers sharing fish and chips on the beach

transferred and how wwoofers experience different lifestyles. An important aspect for these types of wwoofers is to learn about techniques and lifestyles in order to a) strengthen their own aspiration for alternative lifestyles and b) take on knowledge in order to inform their own practices and to be able to emulate the chosen alternative lifestyle.

There are few requirements to beco-

ming a Wwoof host and hosts are not obliged to take on any Wwoofers. Social exchange between participants is the most significant aspect in a successful Wwoofing experience. Wwoofing creates spaces in which the principles of conventional labour exchanges (the commodification of labour) are transformed into alternative exchange relationships. This can lead to the facilitation of ethical life-

styles for the hosts as well as facilitating knowledge transfer and promoting alternative and ethical lifestyles for wwoofers. However, one has to highlight that much of the attraction and popularity of wwoofing lies in the complex interplay of unpredictability, alternative lifestyles, being embedded in local culture and cheapness. As opposed to formal monetarised exchange relations, wwoofing offers a sense of adventure and new and unexpected social experiences.

References

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Wwoofers working in the veggie garden

