

Introduction

As people spend more time indoors and online, there has been an increasing interest in the phenomenon of “World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms” (WWOOF). Upstate New York is no exception. New York City natives as well as people from around the world flock to upstate New York to reconnect with nature and learn about sustainable agriculture through WWOOF experiences where volunteers work around 4-6 hours a day in exchange for room and board. It is estimated that there are currently more than 90,000 volunteers around the world signed up on the WWOOF website.

WWOOF was founded in the early 1970s by a woman named Sue Coppard in the U.K. Sue, a secretary living in London, recognized the need for people without means like herself to access the countryside and additionally wanted to support the organic farming movement. Today, the WWOOF website serves as a worldwide network connecting volunteers with organic farms. There are over 100,000 volunteers on the WWOOF website volunteering on over 12,000 farms in more than 130 countries (Pier, 2017).

WWOOF’s steady growth in popularity coincides with an increasing interest in sustainable agriculture by the general public. Consumers have become increasingly interested in where their food comes from, and many consumers are interested in supporting small-scale organic agriculture. Especially in younger generations, there has been a growing interest in supporting sustainable agriculture.

There are a variety of diverse factors that drive volunteers to participate in WWOOFing. Some WWOOFers are aspiring farmers or homesteaders themselves who WWOOF to gain first-hand knowledge of organic farming methods. Some volunteer because they want to get involved in our food system and support small farmers. Others volunteer as a way to reconnect with nature, or as an inexpensive way to travel, while many WWOOFers seem to be driven by a combination of these factors.

In my research, I wanted to explore what motivates *farmers* to host WWOOFers and to see how these motivations may align or create friction with volunteer motives and how this alignment translates to the experiences of farmers.

In the past 40 years, WWOOF has emerged alongside an environmentalist social movement. WWOOF hosts largely share “ecotopian” ideals which emphasize living in harmony with nature, sustainable use of resources, connection with the land, and healthy eating (Kosnik, 2013).

Additionally, for many, WWOOFing can represent a counter-capitalist possibility of labor dynamics. The dynamic of exchanging labor for room and board is distinctly different from other modes of tourism where money is exchanged for accommodations, meals, and experiences. One question that comes up when discussing the dynamics of WWOOF is if this sort of exchange can serve an anticapitalist function. By nature, WWOOF operates through the barter economy, where labor is exchanged directly for room and board rather than for cash. Although in my preliminary research, I found that most farmers did not see this as such a cut-and-dry trade, with the intangible assets of education, cultural exchange, and relationship building being a primary motivation for hosting WWOOFers. This is not to say that WWOOFing does not serve an anticapitalist function, but rather that when engaging in the barter economy there may be added intangible social benefits beyond those commonly found when exchanging goods and services for cash.

Methods:

Purpose and goals of the research

The purpose of this research is to examine the motivations and experiences of a small group of farmers in New York State who participate in work exchange programs where volunteers receive room and board in exchange for their labor. This was be an inductive phenomenological study to explore the experiences of a select group of individuals.

How will this study contribute to existing knowledge?

Although literature exists to understand the motivations of other types of hosts (ie study abroad, student exchange), little is known about the motivations and experiences of farmers who host work exchanges. Additionally, while case studies of work exchange exist prominently in other regions which have a more prominent work exchange scene such as Hawaii, the experiences and motivations of farmers hosting work exchanges in Upstate New York are relatively unexplored.

Description of Study:

Participants engaged in a verbal interview to discuss their economic, social, environmental, cross-cultural, and educational motivations for participating in a work exchange. Additionally, farmers were asked to describe the perceived benefits and downsides of participating in these programs, as well as the nature of their relationships with volunteers. A small amount of quantitative data was collected on the number of volunteers each farmer hosts, the acreage of their farm, the duration of their average volunteer stays, as well as how long they have been participating in work exchange programs.

The total time commitment estimated for each participant was roughly one hour. Around 45 minutes will be spent in a semi-structured interview hosted either in person or over zoom at the discretion of the participant, and around 15 minutes will be spent gathering basic background information about the participants' farm and history with work exchanges.

I will use the voice memos app to record interviews, as well as zoom recording if participants opt for a zoom interview. Farmers will have the option of being de-identified, in which case transcriptions of these interviews will not be associated with the farmer's name or location.

This research was conducted on the participant's farm unless the participant opted for an online interview in which case the interview was conducted over Zoom.

An invitation to participate in this study was sent by email to 32 different farmers in the Upstate NY region from the WWOOF website. Five farmers who opted to participate were selected, with higher priority given to participants in closer proximity to the finger lakes region.

Interview Questions:

Background information questions:

- How many acres is your farm?
- How many years has your farm been in operation?
- How long have you been hosting work exchange volunteers?
- What is the average number of volunteers you host at one time?
- What is the average duration of a volunteers' stay at your farm?
- What are you'r main income streams on your farm?

After asking the background questions, conducedt a semi-structured interview where I asked the following 10 open-ended questions

- How would you describe your experience with work exchange? Generally, what are the pros and cons of hosting volunteers through work exchange?
- What has been a highlight and lowlight of your experience?
- Would you recommend WWOOF / Workaway to other farmers? Why or why not?
- What were your original motivations for participating in work exchange? How have these motivations changed or stayed the same over time?

- To what extent (if any) is cross-cultural exchange (ie exposing yourself or your family to other languages, cultures, and ideas) a motivation for participating in work exchange?
- To what extent (if any) is educating volunteers (ie through sharing your culture and language, teaching about sustainability, educating others about agriculture etc) a motivation for participating in work exchange?
- To what extent (if any) are economics a motivation for participating in work exchange?
 - To what extent is your economic model reliant on wwoofers?
 - Do you think you break even, lose money, or save money by using wwoofers as a source of labor?
- How (if at all) has the Covid-19 pandemic altered your ability to operate as a farm hosting work exchange volunteers?
- How would you describe the power dynamic between you and your volunteers? Would liken it to a supervisor and employee? Vacation host and guest? Something different entirely?
- How do you think that administration of work exchange programs could be improved?

Results:

One interesting finding of these interviews was that farmers had different ideas about the role that WWOOF labor served on their farms. Margie, the owner of a small organic teaching farm in Corning NY, says, “This is not cheap labor. This is people who desperately are seeking an experience and to learn something that they never had the opportunity to do.” Margie goes on to elaborate on misconceptions that farmers may have about hosting WWOOFers, saying, “So I think farmers are thinking they're gonna fill up their house with, you know, willing workers. Like my husband says, *everyone's passionate about sustainable agriculture, but nobody really knows how to use a shovel.*”

Alternatively, Alison, a farmer from Truxton New York, relies on WWOOFers as her sole source of labor. Alison has been hosting WWOOFers on her homestead in a cooperative living community for over 20 years. While Alison is reliant on help from WWOOFers, her economic model as a homesteader is hugely different than that of small farmers who generate an income from their farm. For Alison, being “reliant” on WWOOFers as her labor source is lower stakes. Although she

Small and medium-scale organic farmers are in an undeniably difficult economic position. Every farmer I talked to had some sort of off-farm income, whether it be through a second job or through a spouse’s off-farm job. According to USDA data,

intermediate-sized farms grossing between \$10,000 and \$250,000 made only 10% of their household income from the farm on average, with 90% of income coming from off-farm sources (Hamer, 2017). One discrepancy I found between the farmers I interviewed was that while some farmers believe that WWOOF volunteers can be a huge asset towards the financial viability of a small farm, other WWOOF hosts were vehemently opposed to relying on WWOOFers to make ends meet. Margie from Bluebird Trail Farm shared that she specifically thought it was a bad idea to rely on WWOOFers for labor, saying, “Our business plan was never built on volunteers, we employ gardeners and nature educators. I don't think it's wise to build your farming operation on with volunteers, because you need to remember, this is an experience. So we rely on our staff that we pay and our WWOOF volunteers just supplement that”. In this way, farmers' views of volunteers varied greatly from farmer to farmer—while Margie kept in mind that volunteers were there simply for the experience, it seemed that some farmers viewed WWOOFers as essential employees. Ben, a farmer at Whitepine Community Farm, said that in past years he was reliant on WWOOF volunteers in order to make ends meet. He recognized that depending on WWOOF labor was not a sustainable solution in the long term, and aspired to change his business model to ensure that he was not dependent on volunteer labor. Ben specifically said that he sees WWOOFing as a sort of barter—he says WWOOF gives people a structure and serves as a place to live and receive food while volunteers learn how to farm. Another farmer, Dani, the owner of Cross Island farm has no permanent employees but still says she wouldn't recommend farmers rely on WWOOF labor. Dani advised that farmers shouldn't plan anything for WWOOFERS that they couldn't complete themselves if the WWOOFer were to drop out. Additionally, she shared that volunteers resent being treated like staff.

While this round of interviews served as a preliminary starting point for further investigation, there are further questions that have arisen for me from my preliminary research. If I decided to continue with this research project, I would like to conduct some follow-up interviews with farmers and ask more specifically about how / if they view WWOOFing as an anticapitalist activity, and how they think WWOOFing fits into the idea of a barter-based economy.

Sources

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