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# Solving labor problems and building capacity in sustainable agriculture through volunteer tourism



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### ABSTRACT

This research evaluates the value of volunteer tourism as it has been applied in the Carolinas through the organization Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF-USA). Its recent growth is attributable to the rise of both the sustainable foods movement and volunteer tourism. Focusing on the experience of farmers, results suggest that despite some caveats there are both social and economic benefits associated with this particular form of tourism, especially in dealing with labor shortages. It is suggested that the WWOOF model may be useful in other forms of volunteer tourism, but that its benefits are socially and spatially contingent, particularly in that WWOOF is embedded in a larger social movement that serves to create a force of willing laborers.

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### Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, the United States has experienced some re-awakening concerning the means of food production. The growth of organic food available to consumers is a testament to this burgeoning movement to foster a more sustainable food system (Howard & Allen, 2010; Johnson, Cowen, & Aussenberg, 2012). A growing demand for locally grown foods has driven a subsequent rise in the number of local farmers markets, which roughly tripled from 2000 to 2013 (USDA, 2013), and USDA certified organic farms, which have nearly doubled since 2000 (USDA, 2014a). Growing attention to the ethics of travel and tourism have also been important trends in the marketplace. As the drawbacks of mass tourism became increasingly apparent, a platform emerged that sought to offer more benign forms of tourism that would allow local places to enjoy the benefits that they had missed

due to high leakage rates, environmental degradation and social changes (Jafari, 1989; Weaver, 2006). The list of “alternative” forms of tourism is long, but among them volunteer tourism has experienced particular growth.

This paper examines a marriage of these trends in the form of volunteer tourism on organic farms. In particular, this study aims at evaluating the benefits farmers receive through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), an organization that matches host farms with tourist volunteers in an effort to support the development of sustainable agriculture. This paper examines this form of tourism from the perspective of farmers in North and South Carolina in the United States who have used volunteers to support their work. This study provides an important perspective on volunteer tourism from the perspective of farmers that has heretofore remained under-examined in other projects that primarily focus on the experiences of tourists. The project grew out of initial skepticism that volunteers could provide significant value to farms due to their inexperience with agricultural practices or lack of effort. However, the outcome of this study suggests that WWOOF volunteers serve several critical functions in the development of host farms, and more broadly in circumstances where volunteer tourism can serve to mitigate local labor market failures.

### What is WWOOF?

WWOOF was created in England in 1971 to allow urbanites to spend time in the countryside in support of organic agriculture (Maycock, 2008). These dual organizational goals were effectively what they remain today, to give organic farmers access to inexpensive (and often inexperienced) labor from tourists in exchange for room and board on farms. However, WWOOF has evolved over time. The original name of the organization, “Working Weekends on Organic Farms”, suggests the limited nature from which it subsequently grew. While the acronym has never changed, the formal title has evolved to recognize the changing scope of the organization. “Willing Workers On Organic Farms” was quickly adopted in recognition of growing duration of volunteer stays. In 2000, after the use of the word “work” in the title began to clash with legal connotations of migrant labor in some host countries, it was altered to the current “World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms”. This latest change reflects the global expansion of the movement as WWOOF organizations now operate in at least 60 countries around the world. In 2013, the Federation of WWOOF Organizations was established with the goal of supporting the WWOOF movement around the world (WWOOF, 2013).

The movement has grown rapidly in recent years. For example, WWOOF-USA was started in 2001 in California with only a few hundred volunteers on a handful of farms. By 2008 the number of WWOOFers surpassed 3000 before reaching 14,000 in 2013 (see Fig. 1). The phenomenon has also entered into the popular lexicon as both a verb, “to WWOOF” and a noun, “WWOOFer”, making “WWOOFing” an increasingly well-known choice for people seeking an alternative type of vacation.

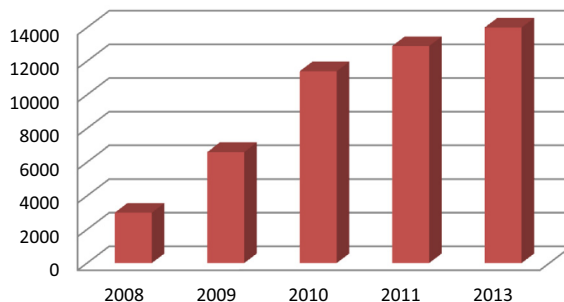


Fig. 1. WWOOF-USA Volunteers 2008–2013 (WWOOF-USA, 2013).

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