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Tourism and Willing Workers on Organic Farms: a collision of two spaces in sustainable agriculture

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to offer a conceptual analysis of the space created by the Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) host as a part of the organic farming movement and how that space now collides with the idea of tourism heterotopias as the changing market sees WWOOFers who may be less motivated by organic farming and more by a cheaper form of holiday. The resulting contested space is explored looking at the role and delicate balance of WWOOFing as a form of sustainable tourism in the context of socially constructed understandings of space. Poststructural concepts of space suggest that it is impermanent, fragile and under constant threat of change. Space is constantly produced and reproduced in the process, spaces become sites where struggle and contestation occur, in this instance as one discourse or discursive practice, namely WWOOFing, intersects with and is influenced by the more dominant capital centric discourse of mass tourism.

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1. Introduction

Willing Workers on Organic Farms' (WWOOF) is a global labour exchange movement, which has steadily become entwined with practices of tourism. There is a highly engaged and symbiotic underpinning in this exchange, and utilizing subjective (emic) and objective (etic) understandings of the perceived space that operates in the WWOOFing context, it is argued that a unique relationship exists between tourism as represented by aspects of power, authenticity and economic exchange, relative to relationships forged in the more typical and idealistic organic agricultural space that emphasise sustainability.

This paper explores the ways in which WWOOFing - as with other forms of alternative cultural initiatives - appears to be increasingly exposed to processes of commodification as it is perceived to facilitate an alternative tourism experience and space, in turn potentially undermining the more traditional organic farming experience and space. As more and more travellers are attracted to WWOOFing they are tending to overlook the ideals of organic farming and its sustainability ethic and seeing it as a means

to travel cheaply, to avoid the beaten path of mass tourism and to have a more authentic tourism experience by engaging with local people and environments. This has led to the collision of two separate and independent spaces; the idealistic and ethical space represented by WWOOF and the commodified and capitalistic space represented by mass tourism. We intend to explore this tension or confrontation by invoking the work of Foucault who offers a poststructural understanding of space as conceptualised in his notion of heterotopia.

From a poststructural perspective mass tourism can be seen as a form of consumer culture that is seen as a "process governed by the play of symbols, not the satisfaction of material needs" (Bocock, 1993, p. 75; see also Miller, 1987). Its other main area of contribution has been its emphasis on spatial discourses and the ways in which consciousness is governed or subjected to particular modes of thinking, feeling and behaviour by dominant social and cultural institutions; ideas which reached their apotheosis in the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1991 see also McDonald and Wearing, 2013, pp. 107–111). We apply this idea here to the symbolic representation that WWOOFing presents and how its core ideals are transcended as its marketability is extended for the purpose of tourism.

What is lacking so far in the scholarly literature on WWOOFing (McIntosh and Campbell, 2001; McIntosh and Bonneman, 2006;

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Maycock, 2008; Nimmo, 2001) is a critical analysis and alternative reading of its interaction with the mass tourism industry over the last 25 years, which this study seeks to remedy. In order to achieve this aim we adapt Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia to understand this interaction and transition of space as it becomes increasingly exposed to commodifying processes (see also Gallen, 2013). A heterotopic perspective provides an understanding that can potentially indicate how a marginal space like that created by WWOOF might negotiate with and resist certain aspects of the mainstream mass tourism industry. This perspective emphasises that the WWOOFing space needs to be analysed from a micro-social perspective where historical inquiry (otherwise referred to by Foucault as a 'genealogy') and power relations are highlighted. An understanding of the history of the WWOOFing space and its interaction with tourism provides an explanation of how its discourse has shifted over time to become increasingly heterotopic as it encounters a new set of power relations in its interactions with mass tourism. Such a perspective provides an indication on how WWOOF might maintain elements of its integrity or indeed what might eventually lead to its complete dilution in the future. Central to tourism is an understanding of the interaction that occurs at the tourist destination, spatial perspectives allow an examination of how the space becomes imbued with the meanings constructed by the actor. With regard to tourism the interaction of people can then be understood as these spaces take their meaning from the people who occupy them, both the tourist and the host.

The paper begins with an introduction of the history of the WWOOF movement and frames it for the reader around its essential elements which also creates the structure for the paper. This leads to an analysis of its intersection with mass tourism and both its specific dilemma and the implications of this view more generally for tourism. As well as providing a critical analysis and alternative reading of the WWOOF-tourism relationship we see this paper contributing to debates in sustainable tourism by providing an examination of the problematic of a common tension or struggle that exists for the different forms of sustainable tourism as they attempt to remain faithful to a particular identity and set of ethical ideals, while they struggle against the threat from potential commodification from mass tourism forms. While our focus is to outline the problematic faced by the WWOOF movement as it attempts to deal with the threat of commodification as conceptualised in this paper, it is instructive for other forms of sustainable tourism such as ecotourism, volunteer tourism, farm tourism, educational and cultural tourism, and nature based tourism who find themselves facing similar dilemmas (e.g. Butcher, 2007; Jovicic, 2014; Liu, 2003; Shaalan, 2005; Wright, 1993). As Shepherd (2002, p. 183) notes, these alternative forms of tourism (alternative to mass tourism in that they emphasise seeking a positive environmental or social dividend) are seeking to keep intact a "sacred cultural sphere of value" that is presumed to "circulate independent of an unstable and profane economic sphere of value". However, as the contemporary WWOOFing movement seeks to engage with tourism it now finds itself negotiating with a new set of power relations.

2. The WWOOF movement

Since emerging in the UK in the early 1970s to support the organic farming movement and foster knowledge about its practices, the Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network has grown (Coppard, 2006; Green, 1980; Pollard, unpub; Vansittart, 2002; Ward, 1995) to become inextricably linked to contemporary sustainable tourism practices. The activity of WWOOFing, involving living and labouring on host member properties, has been significantly expanding both in terms of the number of participants and the number of sites in the world where it occurs. Membership and

activity in Australia in particular has expanded exponentially since the mid-1990s and today there are over 16,000 new annual memberships, purchased largely by international travellers to Australia (Deville, 2011). Yet comparatively little conceptual and critical analysis has been undertaken on WWOOFing by scholars in relation to tourism.

WWOOF offers individuals the opportunity to exchange half a day of their labour on an organically oriented farm, for food and accommodation which is provided by a registered WWOOF host. Host properties conform to varying degrees with criteria established by a national (or regional) WWOOF organisation, generally by being involved in organics in some way, such as by "growing or producing organic products" (WWOOF Australia, 2008). The term 'organics' indicates chemical-free or 'natural' forms of agriculture and WWOOF's core aims and values since its inception is derived from involvement in and support of the broader and now fast growing movement concerned with organic food and fibre production (Biological Farmers of Australia, 2006, 2010; IFOAM, 2008; Lockie et al., 2002; OFA, 2006; Organic Trade Association, 2011). Underpinning that aim is the movement's original premise that organic techniques are more sustainable for people and nature than those centred around or reliant upon synthetic chemicals for fertilizing and pest control, given their well understood ecosystem impacts (e.g. Carson, 1962). In addition, WWOOF hosts are frequently involved in local 'earth repair' or 'landcare' projects that seek to repair damaged natural landscapes for the benefit of local biodiversity, again with the aim of improving the sustainability of people on the planet.¹

WWOOF *a priori* accepts and promotes the view that it is, and it increasingly will be through the significant inputs of human labour, good design and the application of sound practical knowledge, that sustainable agricultural production and consumption are to be achieved. This is because a triple-bottom-line understanding² is required in evaluating any consideration of sustainability *per se*, while conventional, reductionist single (i.e. economic) bottom line approaches to food production involving the application of synthetic chemicals (and increasingly genetically engineered crops) by definition, derive from a paradigm that is promoted for and maintained by economic self-interest and capital accumulation, rather than a holistic evaluation of sustainability focused upon human and non-human well-being.

Whether or not the WWOOF paradigm (or an 'ecocentric' paradigm generally) (O'Riordan, 1981) is accepted or embraced, the increasingly significant numbers of tourists that WWOOF encounters are sometimes personally transformed by the aims and practices of hosts (Deville and Wearing, 2013). As such this should make a close focus upon WWOOFing an area ripe for research in the inchoate field of sustainable tourism. Indeed, given its educative orientation (English, 2007; Maxey, 2006; Maycock, 2008; McIntosh and Bonnemann, 2006; Stehlik, 2002), its role in assisting people, and its frugality in terms of tourism infrastructure, WWOOFing has been described as the quintessential form of low impact, ethical/altruistic, sustainable and/or responsible tourism by some observers (Clarke, 2004; Doherty, 1997; Fenton Huie, n.d.; Hughes and Stitt, 2008; Idelbrook, 2007; Maycock, 2008; Pollard, n.d.; Trainor, 2008). Significantly, it has also been described in the *Scientific American (Earth) Magazine* as an exemplary success in fostering practical sustainability (Chinn, 2008). Again however, tourism

¹ WWOOF Australia is run as a not for profit organisation, seeking to return surplus funds to hosts in the form of grants to enable them to carry out conservation and reforestation projects, which WWOOF emphasizes are often on lands that would otherwise be ineligible for government grants (see Cosgrove, 2000). WWOOF also points out that using WWOOFers to assist in the work comes also at no cost to domestic taxpayers.

² Incorporating the three dimensions of economy, society and environment.

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