Tourism Heterotopias and WWOOFing: A collision of two spaces?

# Abstract

This paper offers 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 and that sites become areas of struggle and contestation as traditional discourses as represented by WWOOFing are influenced by other more dominant discourses of capitalism as represented by mass tourism.

Keywords: WWOOFing, heterotopias, space, tourism, sustainability.

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 sustainability, relative to relationships forged in the more typical and idealistic organic agricultural space.

This paper explores the ways in which WWOOFing is slowly becoming commodified as it is increasingly perceived to facilitate a tourism experience and space that is 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.

This paper begins with an introduction to the WWOOF movement and frames it for the reader around its essential elements which also creates the structure for the paper. This leads to its intersection with tourism and both its specific dilemma and the implications of this view more generally for tourism. We see the analysis outlined in this paper as 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).

1. 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 analysis has been undertaken on WWOOFing by scholars in relation to tourism.

WWOOF offers individual’s 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 derive 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, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002; OFA, 2006; Organic Trade Association, 2011). Underpinning that aim is the assumption 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]](#footnote-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 understanding[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 & 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 & 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 & 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 scholars are yet to specifically wrestle with these considerations on a conceptual level and as WWOOFing provides such an obvious clash of two ideals it provides ‘fertile ground’ for the purpose of examining other areas of sustainable tourism.

1. Poststructural Concepts of Space

The French philosopher Michel Foucault has been highly influential in debates on power and resistance in space, particularly through his notions of the *panopticon* and the regulation and enforcement of relations of power through technological and discursive surveillance (Foucault, 1975, 1980, 1983). Drawing on this work, Wearing (1998, p. 146) argues that tourist spaces have the potential to act as spaces for agency and resistance to domination, allowing room for discourses other than that of the powerful within or alongside of tourism discourse(s) and practice(s). Foucault refers to these contested spaces as *heterotopias* (Edensor, 1998; Hetherington, 1996; Siebers, 1994; Soja, 1996). “Heterotopia refers to the way in which different spaces can come into contact with other spaces that seem to bear no relation to them” (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000, p. 113). Heterotopias are a common feature of life under conditions of globalisation and multiculturalism where different spaces are regularly penetrated and challenged by forces of otherness. Danaher et al., (2000) writes that:

In the context of a contemporary world in which the movement of goods, information and people throughout the globe has become both more rapid and vastly voluminous, the sense of living in a heterotopic world of an infinity of different and often conflicting spaces can produce a crisis of identity. (p. 113)

While heterotopic space produces a sense of crisis for particular cultures and ways of being, they also challenge the natural order of power and control. They allow for constructions of culture which are different from those produced by the everyday constraints of life so an inevitable tension exists between freedom and constraint, and between resistance, negotiation and struggle (Foucault, 1986). The concept of heterotopia is used here to understand the interaction or even collision of the organic farming movement of WWOOF with tourism, as WWOOF struggles to form a new identity for itself. WWOOF has become an evolving space which has the potential to produce new interpretations of itself as it becomes more popular and reaches out to a far larger audience then was previously the case.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the production of spaces is not a neutral process but involves struggles over representation and social meaning (Lefebvre, 1991). The ways in which tourism destinations are converted into spaces with similar symbolic features, attractions and images are inherently political and moral acts which reflect the ideologies of the powerful (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Hall, 1994; Hollinshead, 1999; Lefebvre, 1991; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Saarinen, 2004; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Stokowski (2002, p. 374), for example, notes that social texts which appear to reflect objective reality are actively deployed in constructing a reality capable of being “discursively manipulated towards desired (individual or collective) ends”. Spaces are particularly likely to be manipulated toward the desired ends of those powerful groups producing social texts with the greatest reach. So we ask the question, will WWOOFing with its history and as it develops into a part of the (sustainable) tourism industry become dominated by the business of tourism and so develop a space that moves away from its organic farming roots and particular set of ethical ideals? Indeed, Foucault (1980, p. 52) noted that the “exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power”. We suggest that WWOOFing as a part of organic farming and its ideology provides resistance to such power/knowledge formations offered by the business of tourism. Currently we see this in WWOOFing and examine if the collision of organic farming with tourism provides a space where new and alternative discourses might be created. For as with many forms of alternative discourses they often become cooped by the more powerful ideologies, in this case mass tourism practice which we suggest is a possible commodification process (Wearing, Wearing & McDonald 2010; Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting 2005; Wearing & Wearing 1999) when it enters the experiences and thus spaces of WWOOFing.

In the case of tourism, there is a well understood tendency for most tourism forms to reflect primarily the needs and values of capitalism, and an alternative tourism discourse has thus emerged that has sought in various ways to resist reinforcing existing patterns of power in and through a tourism industry owned and controlled by powerful interests. Simultaneously, organic farming has emerged as an alternative discursive formation relative to conventional, centralized, concentrated and chemically dependent farming models, with the WWOOF organisation, among others, representing an avenue for resistance and a means of generating and transferring alternative practical knowledge to support it, in part through the tourists that utilize it. Indeed, WWOOF Australia consciously opened up to tourism in the early 1990s to expose a wider audience chiefly interested in getting close to local Australian families and environments. Given this interest it was thought that attracting more tourists to WWOOFing could also expose more people to organic farming methods as the following quote illustrates: “we expose more people to organic approaches and alternative thinking…It has always been our hope that some of our visitors go home at least with some seeds of change in their minds” (Pollard, 1993, pp. 81-82).

Undoubtedly, as WWOOF accepted a broader clientele (among hosts and WWOOFers), WWOOFing grew in popularity as “an alternative way of travelling” with the “added benefit of the chance to live as part of the host family and experience local customs and lifestyle”, in contrast to the options available to most tourists (Stehlik, 2002, p. 221). Tourism and the organic movement began to become strongly and irreversibly entwined in this pivotal moment, but this was also seen by many hosts to have changed the character of WWOOFing in Australia irrevocably. WWOOF began to be used increasingly for purposes quite specific to tourists and travellers, as it lends itself so well to the achievement of important pursuits and goals of long-term, low budget travellers. This is evidenced all the more by the fact that since 2005, undertaking three months of WWOOFing is now also a legitimate means to extend a working tourist visa in Australia.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Simultaneously, data on WWOOFer motivations suggests that while much relates to the most common motivations for ‘journeying’ among long-term budget travellers such as “social interaction with local people” (Obenour, 2004, p. 3) and thus experiencing Australian life/culture and environments, there are a range of relatively self-interested motivations such as saving money while travelling and having valuable life experiences that are deemed more important thanlearning about organics,which was the original purpose of WWOOF.Importantly, many hosts also perceive that WWOOFers are primarily keen to save money, ahead of a range of other possible motivations such as experiencing cultural exchange or rural and/or natural environments. Again, improving language skills and enjoying home comforts were considered by hosts to be more important to WWOOFers than learning about and contributing to environmental repair and learning about and experiencing organic farming and related skills, which hosts ranked last.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many hosts have also expressed the view, particularly in regard to shorter term WWOOFers, that they sometimes try to treat hosts’ places “like a backpackers” hostel and therefore do not “have the right spirit” (New Zealand host in McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006, pp. 95-6). This type of view of contemporary WWOOFers underscores a broader concern that the character of WWOOF has changed over a period of time, manifested in the different types of WWOOFers increasingly participating, although there is no clear agreement among today’s hosts on this matter. Certainly some WWOOFers do participate because they have a direct interest in learning about or contributing to efforts towards organic production and earth repair (i.e. the original goals of WWOOF). Some combine an interest in travel with independent concern for a sustainable future. Yet, such sustainability oriented tourists are significantly fewer in number than the majority of general experience seeking or money saving tourists who now WWOOF.

A similar situation has been observed by McIntosh and Mansfeld (2006) who conducted a study on Israeli travellers hosted by Christian missionaries in New Zealand. This group of missionaries run an organisation called Hosting Israeli Travellers (HIT), opening their homes to over 2000 Israeli backpackers each year. Like the WWOOF-tourist/backpacker relationship, the results of McIntosh and Mansfeld’s study indicate that hosts and guests have very different expectations of the arrangement; thus different spaces coming into contact with each other. The hosts, who consider Israeli’s as the ‘chosen people’, see hosting as a religious and spiritual expression of their faith. Whereas for the guest - the Israeli traveller - such hosting arrangements are a means to save money and to take advantage of home comforts. However, while the needs of the hosts are generally realised, the same cannot be said for the Israeli travellers, who find some accommodation to be very basic and the Christian preaching to be tiring.

Opening up WWOOF, combined with growing tourist demand for authentic experiences, is certain to have underpinned phenomenal growth in WWOOFing. The emergence of alternative, new, postmodern and post-tourism forms in response to mass tourism hints at broader forces at play in the social and psychological horizon of those who come to WWOOF. These, combined with pre-packaged arrangements by travel agents including WWOOF membership, the expense of travel in Australia, the emergence of the ‘experience economy’ and related ideology of the omnivorous consumer - that you have to try everything once - lend weight to some hosts’ view that WWOOFers are ‘not like they used to be’. It is thus easy to regard WWOOFing as now firmly part of the tourist industry, while being simultaneously difficult to delineate the exact relationship between tourism and WWOOFing (Deville, 2011). Indeed, this ambiguity might be part of its appeal among those tourists with a penchant for “rejection of the market driven paradigm” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p. 175), as they seek to transcend perceived negative aspects of mass tourism, and/or to assert their ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984) from other tourists.

While the increasingly popular experience is a de-commodified one which effectively occurs in a space far removed from the mass tourism industry in the ordinary homes and properties of organic farmers, it is notable that there is an increasing sophistication also in the way that some hosts are seeking to reach and entice WWOOFers to their properties, outside of the standard host description within the WWOOF book used by members. There are many instances of websites, facebook pages and other social media avenues being used by hosts as a marketing tool to attract WWOOFers. This may simply reflect the increasing adoption of new technologies broadly, but it does raise a question about the degree to which WWOOFing and tourism intersecting in this space demonstrates that resistance to the hegemony of mass tourism may still be found (Hollinshead, 1999; Knudsen et al., 2007). Or that increasingly commercial representations of the WWOOFing-tourist space and a ‘dilution’ of purposes relative to the original aims of WWOOFers in the 1970s may cause transformation in the WWOOFing ‘destination’ as hosts and WWOOFers struggle to align with more commercially created images and interpretations of themselves.

# Contested Tourist Places

Here we draw on de Certeau (1988) and Foucault (1986) in inverting the geographers’ conception of place and space. Here, ‘space’ is viewed as a social construct, while ‘place’ refers to a geographical location. De Certeau (1988, p. 125) suggests that stories as well as lived experience can transform places into spaces by providing spatial organisation, thereby opening a “legitimate theatre for practical actions” and “authorising the establishment, displacement and transcendence of limits”. In this view a variety of discourses/spaces may interact in a place without any one having absolute authority or legitimacy. Based upon the work of Foucault, recent research has incorporated the agency of host destination to exercise resistances, acceptance and integration to tourism and its potential consequences, as well as the agency of the tourist to question the discourse of the industry and to negotiate their own meanings and relationships in tourist space (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Edensor, 1998; Hollinshead, 1998, 1999; Knudsen et al., 2007; Rojek, 1992; 1995; Urry, 2002; Veijola & Jokinen, 1994; Wearing, 1995; Wearing & McDonald, 2002). We find this in our analysis of WWOOFing with its multiple meanings embedded in the WWOOFing experience and host space.

Foucault (1986) firstly describes a tightly ordered space which contextualises all difference. In Hetherington’s (1996, p. 160) terms a space which seeks “to impose a univocal mode of ordering”. According to Bennet (1995), this kind of space has been epitomised by institutions such as museums and libraries and we suggest the host WWOOFing space. However, Edensor (1998, p. 42) seeks to expand this to include contemporary commodified spaces geared towards the promotion of consumption, for example, integrated resorts, theme parks and shopping malls and we can see this occur as tourism enters the host WWOOFing space. Foucault (1986, p. 25) also describes the chaotic, shifting and divergent meanings associated with heterotopias as “the juxtaposing in a single real place (of) several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”. Sibley (1988, p. 412) demarcates exclusive, tightly-controlled ‘purified’ spaces from inclusive weakly classified ‘heterogeneous’ spaces that allow for blurred boundaries, greater self-governance and expression. Purified space allows outsiders to be quickly identified and regulated while heterogeneous spaces, because of their lack of order and predictability, are simultaneously feared and fantasised as realms of desire. So we see the host WWOOFing space as it has moved more intensively into tourism as changing from that tightly ordered space to that more ‘heterogeneous’ space.

Invoking Foucault’s conceptualisation of space, Edensor (1998; 2000) describes a continuum of commodified tourist space from the least commodified, heterogeneous tourist spaces through to highly commodified *enclavic* tourist spaces. The WWOOFing space can be examined as heterogeneous space, where it is thought to provide an alternative to the increasingly commodified and regulated tourist spaces typified by mass tourism. With mass tourism space existing as a realm of transit rather than dwelling (Auge, 1995, p. 107), and subject to surveillance and enforcement of dominant discourse concerning tourist behaviour. Commercial activities controlled by larger entities that control the management of the space, refusing alternatives while for WWOOFing based in a space of organic farming and alternative or sustainable tourism where money is not exchanged (a type of decommmodified tourism space) and most activity in the enclave is dedicated to its maintenance i.e. organic farming activities. This heterogeneous space is typified as a space which supports multiple activities and that allows the tourist to effectively profit from experiences based around organic farming, but it recently is also influenced by that commodifying aspect of mass tourism of both the tourists desire to escape and relax and the hosts desire to benefit (profit) from the tourist visit.

1. Tourism Space vs WWOOFing Space?

To reiterate, we find tourism space and place increasingly being recognised as socio-cultural constructions rather than simply physical locations or destinations. As such, tourist space can be viewed as a site through which “power, identity, meaning and behaviour are constructed, negotiated and renegotiated according to socio-cultural dynamics” (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998: 51). The engagement with space is also central to the shaping of the tourist or WWOOFer. The recognition that space has both material and symbolic dimensions is important in providing the framework for theorising space as disembedded in terms of the interplay between the travel space and the travel experience. Space and travel are both real and imagined. In this context, we consider the significance of disembedded tourist space such as WOOFing and the subsequent mediated tourism experience (which we construct as sustainable or alternative tourism) which sit outside the understanding of the creation of space through commercial enterprise, while also recognising the commodifying process that also effects this space through the tourist’s use of it.

So where does that leave our WWOOFers? What images and expectations do they have of the space? Factors that motivate tourist desire are mysterious and illusive, even to the tourists themselves (MacCannell, 2002, p. 146). Travel to sites of significance to the traveller, such as geographic areas means going to places that have been identified and chosen for the known content they offer as we can see from our host WWOOFing space. Such travel provides the traveller with a framework, an expectation for confirmation of prior knowledge, a purpose. In this, therefore, the focus of tourism studies on attractions, authenticity, motivations, expectations, sights and the provision of the many services that assist in getting to and accessing such sites, provide us with fertile grounds for discussion and future research and we seek in this paper to add to our knowledge of this space. In particular, the argument that tourist cultures are a complex of relationships that occur with, through and in space – both real and imagined and our conceptualisation of WWOOFing in this provides a unique contribution to our understanding of this and for others who desire to examine the area of sustainable tourism from this conceptualisation. For future researchers on WWOOFing and space, the ideas of Morgan and Pritchard (1998, p. 12) may be useful, as they suggest that perspectives focused on ‘authenticity’, ‘strangerhood’ and ‘play’ are part of a body of knowledge within tourism studies, but they note that these perspectives are not adequately grounded in an understanding of the significance of travel and traveller experience. We feel that WWOOFing can provide a rich research environment for this investigation. Morgan and Pritchard (1998) argue that there is a need to gain a deeper understanding of the tourism phenomenon by considering the actual experiences of tourists as they travel. Thus tourism comes to be regarded as an ‘arena of interaction’ which is played out through the tourist’s encounters and engagements with the spaces, places and cultures of travelled destinations.

# Space and the Portrayals of WWOOFing

Much has been written (and recorded) about WWOOFing in the popular media and particularly on the internet (via websites, social media, blogs and video posts). A Google search (conducted in November 2013) of the term ‘WWOOF’ produces significant returns, representing a large base of popular interest in the subject and/or the organisation, more so than searches for ‘alternative tourism’, ‘farm tourism’, ‘educational tourism’ or ‘volunteer tourism’ (Deville 2011). Indeed, by using Google Scholar to undertake such searches, it becomes clear that the proportion of popular to scholarly interest in ‘WWOOFing’ is significantly less than that found in related tourism areas. It is therefore hoped that this paper begins to contribute to this imbalance by allowing stronger connections to theoretical conceptualisations and toward a greater output of scholarly investigation into the WWOOF-tourism nexus.

So far empirical research has generally originated in New Zealand, and has largely portrayed WWOOFing in terms of a neglected aspect of farm tourism (McIntosh & Campbell, 2001). Or as an ‘alternative farm stay experience’, in which several important key elements are present in contrast with regular, commercially oriented farm-based tourism (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). These include ‘rurality’as a source of ‘otherness’ or difference for many urban travellers, the opportunity to ‘learn about organics’, the ‘personal meaningfulness’ of the experience and the element of ‘sincerity’ in the experience. By analysis of interviews with a number of WWOOFers, McIntosh and Campbell (2001) developed some important insights about the nature of the WWOOFing experience and, along with numerous accounts in the broader media, bring attention to the interactive nature of the experience between WWOOFers and hosts. However, to date a coherent understanding of this key aspect of interactivity, or engagement among or between participants, built from sound empirical research, has not been offered. Additionally, these micro social elements have not coherently been put in to a macro-social or sociological context.

Ateljevic and Doorne (2001, p. 169) in reviewing the backpacker literature found overlaps between WWOOFers and ‘long-term budget travellers’, who generally are portrayed as seeking to “escape from mass ‘institutionalized’ tourism flows”. However, they also note that a very wide range of motivations and consumer behaviours are evident among backpackers and that two ends of a continuum exist: traditional long-term travellers who live with the citizens of the country for long periods and mass backpackers (Riley, 1988) who travel to “holiday spots” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p. 175).[[5]](#footnote-5) The character of the backpacker will no doubt continue to differentiate and morph and characterizations will evolve (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, 2004; Bennett, 2007; Cohen, 2004; Curtis, 2005; Huxley, 2004; Krippendorf, 1987; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Pearce, 1990; Riley, 1988). But surviving the traditional end of the spectrum, the “richness of experience (cultural immersion, social relations, back to nature) will continue to be of primary importance”, and here Ateljevic and Doorne (2001, p. 175) suggest WWOOFing will play a key role. They observe that WWOOF is a program “increasingly oriented towards a growing interest from these travellers” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p. 175) as, combined with travel, WWOOFing assists them in their goal of avoiding the ‘beaten track’ of institutionalized tourism (in the language of Cohen 1972, 1973). Importantly, schemes such as WWOOF “facilitate the spontaneity they seek” as “freedom and flexibility are regarded as crucial for the whole experience” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p. 175). Ateljevic and Doorne (2004, p. 71) again reinforce the message that WWOOFing is part of a broader trend among traditional backpackers towards “rejection of the market driven paradigm” in favour of “more extended immersion experiences with landscape and culture”.

Stehlik (2002, p. 221) drew attention to the basis upon which the WWOOFing exchange operates, observing that “the system runs entirely on goodwill and non-monetary exchange without anyone creaming off a profit or being exploited.” His primary focus is upon the range of adult learning opportunities that the experience of WWOOFing and hosting can bring to participants in unfamiliar situations. He dwells upon the need for a “willingness to engage and adapt to local customs and environments”, which can bring about material and personal enrichment, including the building of social capital for both WWOOFer and host (Stehlik, 2002, p. 224). The significance of this work is to indicate the importance of human engagement, particularly within a de-commodified context.

Hughes and Stitt (2008, p. 41) suggest WWOOFing deserves attention as an exemplary ‘energy exchange’ in which hosts “communicate their needs to their visitors, who in turn provide what they can, resulting in a wonderful give-and take dynamic”. This form of *symbiosis* situates the WWOOF exchange rather differently from the majority of economically driven, market-based and commodified host-guest relations, emphasizing also that hosts retain power in respect of meeting their own needs directly through hosting.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Maxey (2006) explores from a geographer’s perspective how we are to sustain sustainable agriculture, and in passing considers that some actors within North America and the UK such as the ‘alternative food networks’ (small-scale organic producer-suppliers in the developed world) use the voluntary labour of WWOOFers (among other strategies) to maintain economic viability. This is certainly the case in Australia (Deville, 2011) and New Zealand (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; Nimmo, 2001).

Maycock (2008) casts the growth and spread of WWOOF in the context of a general ‘greening’ arising from growing awareness of both dependence on and disconnection from nature. The growing (re)popularisation of farmers markets, community supported agriculture schemes (CSAs) and local food co-ops are seen as part of a movement for the re-localisation of food and efforts to reconnect with the sources of food eaten (e.g. Lockie et al., 2002). Maycock (2008) asserts that as many look to make local efforts to address global problems through modified consumption choices, there is also increased interest in attempting backyard food production, sometimes through involvement in local community gardens. The desire to return to and connect with the land as various crises associated with modern living and/or economic circumstances become more apparent is not new, but most people “have forgotten (or, rather, never learned) the basic skills of agricultural living” and it is in this context along with others, that one might see a growing interest in WWOOF, as it connects “people wanting to try their hand at farming/growing with farms” (Maycock, 2008, p. 284). Certainly this was the original intention of WWOOF, but Maycock expects WWOOF to grow along these lines as part of the general desire in an increasingly globalising world, to gain an educational and cultural exchange.

General concern about how to develop and promote tourism in such a way that overdevelopment does not occur has largely produced a carrying capacity centered approach to defining and developing notions of ‘sustainable tourism’. In practice, this points to the need to introduce limits to tourist numbers or activities, in turn generating examples of what some see as exclusive, or romantic tourism (Urry, 2002), which are also seen as problematic (Wheeller, 1993). Saarinen (2006) argues the carrying capacity centered approaches to notions of sustainable tourism have been built upon the anthropocentric concept of *sustainable development*, in comparison with the more eco-centric term *sustainability*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Moscardo (2008, p. 9) too has argued that the theory and practice of the much discussed idea of ‘sustainable tourism development’ is still primarily limited to a concern about “the continuity of tourism” than “the contribution of tourism to sustainable outcomes”. Following Wall (1997), she argues that the real question to be asked about tourism and sustainability is whether and in what form might tourism contribute to sustainable development? The challenge she says, is to rework our assumptions about the existence and nature of sustainable tourism, and to begin with the different idea that tourism might be properly viewed as potentially able to contribute to sustainable development in local ways. In this way, tourism should be seen as a “potential resource for communities seeking sustainable development options” through “wider and more innovative types” of tourism development. Thus tourists themselves “can be seen as more than just customers, they can also be seen as human resources for regional development” (Wall, 1997, p. 33). Moscardo (2008, p. 9) then identifies several instances in which innovative alternative forms of tourism are already working in this way, specifically describing WWOOF hosting as “an example of the use of tourist volunteers to support local organic agriculture.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Observing that the “initial establishment of organic agriculture can be challenging”, often associated with limited income during the transition period and thus low levels of productivity, Moscardo (2008, p. 9) observes that “the ability to access low-cost labour can be an important benefit” in areas where labour intensive organic agriculture is an important benefit for regional areas. Significantly however, in terms of framing the contribution of the present research, Moscardo (2008, p. 9) notes that the potential use of volunteer tourists in “assistance with traditional economic activities has yet to be fully explored”.

Others have also sought to challenge narrow economic development driven perspectives underpinning some versions of the sustainable tourism paradigm. Potts and Harrill (2002, p. 55) argued that the tourism industry has “the potential to improve the world, not just sustain itself” and that their suggested proactive ‘travel ecology’ approach could provide “a form of tourism development that would encourage a more holistic form of community development”, one in which the needs of community are clearly articulated and placed before that of development proponents. Though not articulated by them, their position has some overlap with the concept of WWOOF in that it advocates ‘backyard activism’ or the ‘geography of everywhere’, through the recognition “that all landscapes, no matter how mundane, contribute to the community tourism product” (Potts & Harrill, 2002, p. 51).

Stanford (2008) argues that responsible tourism is not the exclusive domain of eco, green or other niche types of tourism, but should be applicable to all, including conventional mass tourism. Being ‘responsible’ must be considered in relation to quadruple bottom line thinking[[9]](#footnote-9), rather than simplistic progressions (i.e. *not green* to *totally green*)(Swarbrooke & Horner, 1999). The dimensions of responsible tourism Stanford considered are ‘respect and awareness’, ‘reciprocity’, ‘local economic contributions’ and ‘engagement’ with landscapes and people. Stanford (2008, p. 270) argues WWOOFers represent the extreme case with respect to engagement, with WWOOFers being “very responsible” tourists with “a deep engagement with local people”. By contrast, a “non-responsible tourist” keeps themselves “distanced from any kind of engagement”. A middle ground is exemplified by the tourist that visits a local pub or café with a “passing interest in the people they meet” (Stanford, 2008, p. 270). Few tourists are likely to achieve large degrees of responsibility in *each* of the above dimensions, argues Stanford (2008, p. 270), without locally suitable guidance. It is therefore significant that the WWOOF model itself directly offers this form of local guidance in respect of appropriate types and levels of responsibility, at the level of individual hosts (Deville, 2011; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). Indeed, beyond the dimension of engagement (which Stanford focused upon), it is arguable that the WWOOF mechanism also builds into the core exchange between hosts and WWOOFers reciprocity and respect/awareness, and of course labour, which can be readily seen as being a substitute form of economic benefit for participating hosts.

Deville (2011) found that WWOOFing is used by a growing number of contemporary budget tourists/travellers seeking a flexible experiential pathway into the socio-cultural realm of Australian hosts. It is interactive and economical, but perhaps crucially for some, removed from the usual techniques of ‘touring’ and ‘gazing upon’ that are almost entirely rooted in and determined by commodified or market based frames of reference. The growth of WWOOFing suggests the existence of a demand for such decommodified experiences as part of “a distinctive form of escape from mass ‘institutionalized’ tourism flows” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p. 169). WWOOFing allows travellers to achieve ‘avoiding the beaten track’, which can be otherwise difficult to achieve (MacCannell, 2002; Richards & Wilson, 2004), while allowing them to extend travel time. The characteristic freedom and flexibility of WWOOFing (compared with most volunteer tourism forms) are “crucial for the whole experience” for those contemporary backpackers seeking “more extended immersion experiences with landscape and culture” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004, p. 71), without significant demands of commitment.

1. Conclusion

This paper has critically discussed the space created by WWOOFing hosts as a part of the organic farming movement and how that space is influenced by its use and association with tourism. It is suggested that when viewed from poststructural concepts of space we can better understand the complexities of the interaction in this space as the organic farming philosophy meets the traveller. We argue that it collides with the space created by tourism heterotopias as the changing market sees WWOOFers who may be less motivated by organic farming and more by a cheaper form of holiday. This allows us to present an array of insights, which when viewed in conjunction with a significant body of popular media, enables insights and questions about the nature of the relationship between WWOOFing and tourism (particularly alternative and sustainable tourism) and perhaps to sustainability more generally.

For WWOOFing McIntosh and Bonneman (2006) have developed some important insights about the nature of the WWOOFing experience and, along with numerous accounts in the broader media, they bring attention to the interactive nature of the experience between WWOOFers and hosts. However, to date a coherent understanding of this key aspect of interactivity, or engagement among or between participants, built from sound conceptual analysis, has not been offered. Additionally, these micro social elements have not coherently been put in to a macro-social or sociological context. This paper provides the basis for research for example that might explore the interactions of the WWOOFer host and the traditional WWOOFer (as constructed by the more idealistic notion of WWOOFing) and the cheap travel WWOOFer (as constructed by the idea of a tourist seeking a cheap holiday rather than educating themselves in the field or organic farming). This brings the notion of difference to the WWOOFing space and can be constructed as a complex three way interaction where WWOOFer might clash with WWOOFer and also with the host. This might be explored using theory such as ‘social exchange theory’ (Ap, 1992, p. 668), which has been invoked in other areas of sustainable tourism such as agritourism (Cho & Petrick, 2014).

This paper contributes to debates in sustainable tourism by offering a contemporary and conceptual perspective of WWOOFing as a collision of two spaces, one that is the idealistic and original space of the WWOOF paradigm, and the other of the tourist that brings a more commodified regime that challenges one of workers looking to contribute to a space of sustainability. The ontological framework invoked in this paper is hinged on a poststructuralist spatial framework, mainly based in Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, which is presented as a heterogeneous performative space of material and symbolic appropriation. This perspective is offered as a basis for future research as it raises conceptual issues that are relevant to other forms of sustainable tourism while also providing the basis for developing future research around the WWOOFing phenomenon.

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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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Incorporating the three dimensions of economy, society and environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While not specifically targeted in the research, there is some evidence that this step towards embracing a more formal realm of tourism and labour market management has led to the perception of further change impacting on the hosting experience. This is certainly one area that could be the subject of further research. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was not perceived by hosts to be a barrier to a successful or valuable exchange however. Of greater significance in this regard is the general approach and attitude of WWOOFers to the experience (Deville, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The first group are painted as travelling lightly and cheaply, often staying in specific places for long periods as part of an effort made to remedy Western anomie/alienation from constant exposure to the “pervasive values of an overarching capitalist system” (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001, p.185) and homogenized global culture. The contrasting end of the ‘backpacker’ spectrum echoes Cohen’s (1979) recreational tourist. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is perhaps partly because of the inherent unknowns and significant levels of interpersonal trust involved (Larson, 2000) in this decommodified system of energy exchange that WWOOFing has also been described as a form of adventure travel (Anon., 2003; Fenton Huie, n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This perspective overlays the more general one of a continuum ranging between technocentrism and ecocentrism originally articulated by O’Riordan (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that New Zealand WWOOF hosts have been portrayed as using tourism to enhance their farms (McIntosh & Campbell, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Incorporating the dimensions of economy, society, environment and culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)