WWOOF vs SAWP: Migrant Farm Labour Programs Compared

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February 2017
In Spring 2011 I was a sprightly young adult eager to see the world. After a failed attempt to do some white saviour volunteer tourism in Ghana (glad that didn’t work out...), I saved up my pennies to go WWOOFing in France. The World Wide Organization of Organic Farms, or WWOOF, states that it is “a worldwide movement linking volunteers with organic farmers and growers to promote cultural and educational experiences based on trust and non-monetary exchange, thereby helping to build a sustainable, global community.”1 Basically I worked on farms for free and the farmers fed and housed me. During my three months I stayed at three different farms where I worked 5 hours a day, 5 days a week. These farms differed in terms of labour requirements, eating arrangements and living conditions.

I chose my first farm because it was an olive farm down south and the ad was in English (despite 8 years of French education through the public school system, my French skills felt weak). I had planned to spend my entire three months at this farm but naively, I thought the farm would still be French so I could practice my language skills and once I arrived and realized it was run by an English woman, I started to reconsider my plans.

![Image of people at a farm]

The English woman was an older hippy who lived alone at the bottom of the Pyrenees near a small town with her four big dogs, small coop of chickens, vegetable patch, and acre of olive trees. During my stay she housed from 4 to 6 other WWOOFers. They were all early twenties, mostly white Americans but there were a few boys from other parts of Europe. Some were housed inside where there were two rooms with 3 beds each, and there were two caravans outside. Our host had us do a variety of tasks including caring for the vegetable garden, weeding the olive trees, walking her four dogs, feeding the chickens, cleaning the compost toilet, bringing her second-hand book store to the market, looking for specific books in her shed, and so forth. She had us a on a strict eating schedule, meant to organize our day, but always made big delicious meals, complete with a jug of wine for dinner – but the second was €2.

1 http://wwoof.net/
By the end of April temperatures were rising to 30 degrees, so for my next farm I went all the way up north to Bretagne. This was my first real introduction to rural France and the small communities of a few houses all surrounded by farmland. My host was a family of four: hippy parents and two sons between 8 and 13. My ability to speak or vocally understand French at this point was abysmal, and the family didn’t really speak English so there was a major language barrier. We could get by but I would sit with them for dinner and not understand a word. In the month that I was there two other WWOOFers who worked there as well, but there were times when I was alone. I spent most of my time in solitude, reading English books and riding a bike around the area. This farm was much less structured and well not really a farm. There was a vegetable garden we helped weed, a few chickens to care for, and sometimes we helped the dad build a new room onto his house. We were invited to lodge in a bedroom upstairs with two beds or the two caravans in the back that were nestled in the rather large chicken coop. We made our own breakfast and ate with the family for lunch and dinner, and we often participated in food preparation as well.

The third farm was a real true farm – finally! They had a tractor for their acres of root vegetables, large greenhouses for their tomatoes and zucchini, a field of goats and a stable for a few cows whose milk they turned into cheese. The farm was family run - the grandparents
lived in the middle of the farm by the barns, while their two daughters and their families lived in nearby communities. I stayed with one of the daughters, her husband and their 1-year-old baby. This time I lived in a caravan in a small pen down the road where they kept two old goats. The goats were cute but it was annoying when they got into the caravan. The farm was big, there were few workers and there was much to do. When we began harvesting they hired a few workers but I did not speak to them much. We started at 7 am every day, and I would be done at noon – the other farmers would have lunch, take a siesta, and get back to it in the afternoon. My tasks were varied – I learned how to drive a tractor, pick potatoes out of the ground, groom tomato plants, hustle goats, make goat and tomme cheese. I would make my own breakfast, and eat lunch and dinner with my host – here I was often involved in food preparation as well. I was the only WWOOFer on this farm, but felt closer to my hosts. They were fairly young too, and my French had improved. The community was closer to a town where I could buy fresh pastries and the family would take me to the market or have events on the farm. I still went on many bike rides and read a lot of books but I was finally experiencing real life on a farm with a family I connected to.

This last farm was my favorite because I felt like I had finally gotten the farm experience that I was seeking, that I had gained skills, could converse in French and I enjoyed working with my employer. The second farm was my least favorite host for a few reasons. The inability to communicate proved to be mentally exhausting and negatively affected my mental health, as I became more solitary and reserved. During that month, I spent most of my leisure time riding bikes and sought solace in reading English literature. Plus the tasks felt mundane and not what I had expected – it was more a hobby farm than a productive one. While I think the English woman exploited the system more than the other farms I stayed on as she took in a large number of young people to not only farm but help with her daily chores and side businesses, I did have the most fun on this farm because it had the most people. We only worked 5 hours so there was more time for leisure, which could get lonely, so it was good to have more people to enjoy it with.

The WWOOF reflects trends evident in the globalization of work and temporary migrant worker programs, in that people are traveling to different countries to work on farms, but if differs in a few very important ways: namely that it is a voluntary program sought out by mostly white middle-class youth looking for an “authentic” travel experience who are free to travel where and when they choose. My experience was very different from those who migrate through programs such as the Seasonal Agriculture Program (SAWP) workers but some interesting parallels exist.

In interviews with seasonal workers, farm owners and migration management agencies, Preibisch (2007) shows how the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program in Canada exploits its workers by paying them low wages for long hours in unsafe work places. Workers are kept disciplined by working through agencies headquartered in foreign countries that can manage their workforce more strictly. Canada averts the financial burden of social assistance for workers and their families by preventing them from applying for permanent residency. Agencies and
employers were also able to shape their workforce by implementing rules that ensured workers were landless, had families and were from a specific country of origin. In this way they created a poor, docile workforce who wanted to return home, and were able to prevent social interaction by bringing in workers who spoke different languages.

Some of the issues that made seasonal agricultural workers vulnerable to exploitation – being tied to a single employer and highly dependent on an income – did not apply to the WWOOFers who are typically financially stable and choosing where to work for free. This means that WWOOF workers are more likely to work under the agreed upon conditions – as they are free to leave if they find those conditions unsatisfactory. Furthermore, there is little screening of the workers – potential workers email statements of interest to the farmers and there is no agency that disciplines workers or sends them to farms based on the farmer’s specifications. Similar to the SAWP, there is little supervision of participating farms that can be exploitative or operate under false premises. I did hear stories of hosts who expected long hours of work under poor working conditions. People’s reactions to these experiences depended on their personality – some stayed because they felt obliged to carry out their agreed upon time, others just ran off without saying a word. This freedom of movement is an important difference between the WWOOF and SAWP.

Hennebry and Preibisch (2012) show how the agriculture industry in particular has been successful in shaping immigration policy to meet their seasonal needs. They discuss this global movement towards managed migration and show how even best practice models such as Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program are problematic. The practices that the authors found to be successful in Canada’s SAWP was the cooperation between countries, transparency in admission criteria and access to healthcare for workers. These practices are virtually non-existent in the WWOOF, which is premised on the use of temporary travel visas. Many of the practices recommended to improve the Canadian SAWP, such as recognition of qualifications and providing paths to permanent residency, do not apply to WWOOF, as it is a program built around volunteer tourism so participants are seeking to gain skills and travel, but not necessarily stay.

One flaw of these papers would be that they do not discuss much the effect of capitalism’s globalization on the agriculture industry. Both SAWP and WWOOF are built around exploiting cheap labour. This is a direct result of globalization, as monopolies try to push down prices to increase demand by offering lower wages. The Canadian agricultural industry would argue that they must offer the lowest wages to compete in the market, and given their unique status in Canada’s immigration policies, it is evident that they have argued this point well. In a similar vein, these small organic farms in France are trying to compete in the market and must set prices low to sell. Low prices require low labour costs and these farmers are just trying to make a go of it like everyone else. Therefore, while it is nice to say that we should improve the existing migrant labour programs, it may be more effective to address the structural economic issues that exist.
WWOOFing is a mix of volunteer tourism and temporary migrant labour programs. Young people go WWOOFing to travel the world on a dime, seeking to experience a new country and culture. Farmers take advantage of this trend to utilize cheap labour but because of the organic component, are able to sell it as saving the planet. All the farmers I stayed with were fundamentally good people and I don’t think they had bad intentions with participating in the program. I do think they felt pressured to join because of these global economic forces that are pushing down the price of crops and forcing farmers to seek cheap labour options in order to continue producing. In an unexpected twist, those that I would label “hippies” seemed like they were exploiting the system more in that they were participating on false premises as they didn’t need farm labour and just wanted a hand doing the chores required to run a sustainable home. Growing your own vegetables, raising animals, utilizing compost toilets, renovating, raising a family – these activities can require a lot of human labour to succeed. My role maintaining these sustainable homes harkens me back to when families had a lot of children who worked to maintain their homes. Now that people want to continue these sustainable, almost traditional lifestyles, they are unable to afford to pay waged labour and so are using systems like WWOOF to keep them going.

I would still recommend the WWOOF as a cheap way to travel and a nice way to meet people, but I question the fundamental purpose of the organization as a rosy way to find cheap labour for struggling farms and the global economic forces that are engineering the problems.

References
