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The Social Construction and Experiences of NZ WWOOFing within Volunteer Tourism

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Title: The Social Construction and Experiences of NZ WWOOFing within Volunteer Tourism

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Abstract:

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) has been framed as an alternative form of tourism that networks people interested in participating in sustainable lifestyles. Farm hosts offer food, shelter, and an opportunity to engage and learn about the work of farming, while volunteers receive free food and accommodation. The primary aim of WWOOFing is to create a cultural exchange, develop knowledge and learning while working together on the farm. In New Zealand (NZ), WWOOFing values are fairly loose, leaving the specific details to be discussed between the host and volunteer. Essentially, the volunteer works between 4 and 8 hours a day in exchange for learning about organic farming and about another culture. This paper will discuss the key findings of an investigation into the social construction and experiences in NZ WWOOFing. First, by highlighting how the WWOOFing experience is framed through espoused aims and values, the study reveals that farm hosts and WWOOFers socially construct NZ WWOOFing experience through being involved into ‘dirty activities’, crossing various thresholds and striving for the personal ideals.

These three key themes were evident in the participants’ accounts and actions. This finding was further examined through the construction of an ideal WWOOFing experience for hosts and volunteers using Lego Serious Play (LSP) methodology. The Lego Serious Play workshops helped to understand the ‘ideal’ WWOOFing experience, which is based on people involved in sharing the culture, the experiences, and the work. The findings also revealed a lack of ethical accountability within WWOOFing. Overall, we agree with Deville and Wearing (2013, p. 151), who argue that NZ WWOOFing’s ideals for “transformational tourism” ignore issues of ethics and equity, and miss learning opportunities for self-efficacy, empowerment, and real sustainable change. Instead, to understand the experiences of farmers and volunteers, there is a need for further examination of ethical accountability in volunteer tourism and its associated meanings. The later research can build on these findings to improve the knowledge, experience, and practice in this area.

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