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Issue Analysis Report

**An argument for Sociocultural, and Economic Awareness for WWOOF Volunteers before their Farm Stay in Latin America.**

Tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean has exponentially increased in the past couple of decades (ATDI, 2011). Two major sectors of this tourism boom have been voluntourism and ecotourism. Voluntourism is defined as “a form of tourism in which travelers participate in voluntary work, with the goal of contributing to positive social change in host communities” (Oxford, Dictionary, 2018). Ecotourism is the form of tourism focused on promoting environmental sustainability and highlighting environmental and conservation efforts. Sustainable tourism, in general, combines the purported virtues of both ecotourism and voluntourism, and can be visualized as a three-legged stool. In order for sustainable tourism to succeed it needs all three legs to be equally fortified; it needs to be economically inclusive and viable, socially positive, and environmentally friendly (Jaciewicz, 2012).

A key tourism effort that is striving to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism is World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). WWOOFing is an online forum that connects travelers with organic farm owners to facilitate a different form of traveling, in which people receive room and board in exchange for labor (FoWo 2018). World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms started in 1971 in the UK when founder Sue Coppard wanted to experience a “rural lifestyle.” In exchange for room and board she provided labor on a farm, then realized that there was a vast number of people who were interested in similar exchanges. The WWOOF community exploded with interested farms and volunteers signing up, and the network now spans 45 different countries (FoWo, 2018). Although WWOOFing is not the most common form of sustainable tourism in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), it is prevalent enough, with

16 countries and 64,965 volunteers participating. A quote from the homepage of the WWOOF website exemplifies how its mission coincides perfectly with the three-legged stool imagery of sustainable tourism, “WWOOF 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” (FoWo, 2018).

To evaluate whether WWOOFing really can be considered an example of sustainable tourism, the program must be evaluated using the imagery of the three-legged stool. WWOOFing by its very definition is designed to support organic farming, and therefore promotes a type of tourism with a strong environmentally friendly “leg.” Notwithstanding the environmental consequences of tourism and travel in general, on the whole, WWOOF’s environmentally friendly “leg” is solid. However, despite WWOOF’s claims to also be economically and socially positive in the communities where it operates, my experience as a WWOOF volunteer alerted me to the relative weakness of the other “legs” of the stool. I argue that these two “legs” should be strengthened so that WWOOFing can be a maximal force for sustainable tourism good.

After briefly reviewing literature on the effects of tourism and voluntourism, I will examine WWOOFing as an example of sustainable tourism, and finally will make suggestions for potential solutions that would help WWOOF become more holistically sustainable. In doing so, I will argue that in order for WWOOFing to be as beneficial as possible to volunteers, farm hosts, and local communities, volunteers should be better educated when they enter the arrangement, and should possess knowledge of the unique economic and sociocultural circumstances of the farm and its local and regional context.

## **Tourism, Ecotourism, and Voluntourism in Latin America and the Caribbean**

To start by looking at the big picture of tourism, there are benefits to local communities such as the generation of tourism dollars in host countries and the opportunity for travelers and hosts to learn from one another however, these benefits are wrapped up in a complex bundle with many well-documented negative impacts of tourism. Tourism can cause rapid changes in communities that had not previously been exposed to the tourism sector. Negative economic impacts can include inflation, the often inconsistent seasonal character of tourism, and changes to other sectors of the economy as tourism proliferates in a given place (Agüera, 2016). It has been documented by LAC geographers, that often once a place is a tourism hotspot in LAC, its economy and sociocultural relations change, then it is abandoned for the next new destination, leaving a broken system that was created by tourism (Jackiewicz, 2012). Other negative impacts include threats to social cohesion as some community members benefit from tourism more than others, or some community members welcome the industry while others disprove of its presence; absence of adequate evaluation of the environmental and sociocultural changes caused by an influx in tourists; and lack of consultation with local communities in the process of tourism project establishment, implementation, and management (Agüera, 2016) (Mederano, 2017).

An illustration of tourism's negative impacts in LAC are explored in *A Small Place* by novelist Jamaica Kincaid (1988). In this seminal work Kincaid views tourism in her Caribbean island home through a lens sensitive to colonization and economic imperialism. Wealthy, mostly white tourists from the Global North come to reconnect with nature and relax, not realizing or perhaps not caring about the power they wield. Through their tourism natural resources and local culture become commodified to serve visitors, and local populations become economically dependent on serving tourists in their endeavors, often for minimal wage, which accelerates the social changes that come from an influx of tourists. Both economic processes create a

dependence on the income from tourism, and permanently alter the relationship locals have with the environment as it gets commodified to be marketed as “an experience” for the tourists (Kincaid, 1988). While WWOOFing is an example of small-scale “alternative” tourism, quite different from “mass tourism” enterprises like resorts and cruise ships, it is still characterized by an incursion of foreigners that normally come with tourist dollars, and can change the economic and sociocultural fabric of small rural areas, under the pretense of a sustainable form of travel.

Voluntourism adds yet another layer to the complexity of the relationship between tourism and local peoples, economies, and environments. There are some similarities between voluntourism and tourism generally: voluntourists also seek new experiences, opportunities to learn about new cultures, and personal growth, however voluntourists diverge from traditional tourists in that they envision themselves as engaging in more “authentic” experiences and relationships while traveling since they are also “giving back” to the communities they visit through volunteer work (Occhipinti, 2016). Under the pretense of providing aid, and practicing global citizenship, voluntourists— typically from Global North countries—are arguably participating in a new form of imperialism. Since colonial-era mission trips designed to “salvage the souls” of the “savages,” privileged people have, under the guise of assistance, engaged in adventures that push their ideals onto other societies deemed “under privileged,” “uneducated,” or “uncivilized” (Occhipinti, 2016). The same premise is adopted today when privileged peoples seek to “give back,” by implementing Western ideals of “assistance” (that may or may not be welcomed by the host community) in Global South countries while partaking in a tourist adventure under the banner of voluntourism. Today voluntourism is often used as a resume enhancer and is also practiced by those with good intentions who wish to combat social ills the world over, but it is inherently flawed. It has been argued that the beneficiaries of voluntourism

are actually the voluntourists, rather than the communities and individuals at the receiving end of the volunteer efforts (Proehl, 2015). When voluntourists predominately from the Global North come to the Global South, they are often ineffective in their “helping” of local communities due to the brevity of their stay and the lack of consultation with the local peoples about their actual needs and concerns; regardless, the voluntourists seek to implement their own solutions (Proehl, 2015). The imposition of Western-centric worldviews and methods, backed by Western money, leave locals with little choice but to cooperate with the voluntourists, which can corrode everything from their economy to their culture as the tourists bring in major economic and cultural changes (Legand, 2014).

### **WOOOFing as sustainable tourism: A critical examination**

Understanding WOOOFing in the context of the above background on tourism and voluntourism offers a critical viewpoint that is not often considered by voluntourists. On the surface, WOOOFers are benefitting both the environment and local communities, however, their intent is often more about personal advancement through resume building and “doing good” by helping impoverished rural communities. There is little research-based evidence that voluntourism helps local communities, provides professional expertise, or encourages meaningful encounters (Vrsati, 2013). The average WOOOFer is typical of any voluntourist—they stay for short stints of time, generally provide unskilled labor, and then leave with a “unique experience” (Bunn, 2014). The argument is not that WOOOFing is lacking in all value, but that evidence-based critiques of sustainable tourism should be fully understood by WOOOFers to give them a more knowledgeable starting point from which they can create meaningful relationships and aid farm hosts. Specifically, WOOOFing, like all sustainable tourism, has potentially negative impacts on local economies and societies. In what follows, I will illustrate

why an interdisciplinary perspective attentive to the possible economic and social effects of WWOOFing must be taken seriously by WWOOFers if they are to provide more meaningful service to farms and communities.

### *Potential Economic Impacts of WWOOFing*

The specific economic repercussions of WWOOFing must be considered and improved if the goal is to make WWOOFing a truly sustainable form of tourism. Analyzing the positive implications of WWOOFing, some scholars have argued that the WWOOFing partly exists outside of a purely capitalist economy, providing a space for alternate forms of economic relationships that are not only valued through wage-based labor, but employ a different exchange mechanism (Mosedale, 2011). Bunn (2014) argues that WWOOFing is value-driven and not entirely profit-driven (although profits do matter to farms), and therefore WWOOFing is an example of a network that combines social values and incentives in addition to economic ones. In other words, although there are not large economic gains in hosting voluntourists, due to the costs of their room and board and volunteers' lack of skilled labor, the benefits go beyond that of just profit. Benefits that are not inherently profit driven include the relationships created through selling products at local markets, and the local environmental and health benefits of keeping production organic (Bunn, 2014).

Despite WWOOFing's contributions to interesting alternative more-than-economic forms, potentially negative economic implications of the WWOOFing economy must also be considered. Marxist geographers have argued that capitalism must achieve a "spatial fix," or must colonize new, non-capitalist spaces, to resolve inherent over accumulation crises in other places. Tourism can be viewed as a vehicle for this capitalist expansion, bringing new spaces and territories into the capitalist economy that previously were not privatized or commodified under

capitalism (Devine, 2015). Another economic consideration is commodification more generally. Rural communities that have long been mostly self-contained, experience the commodification of people, culture, and natural resources for foreign tourists, creating a new identity for entire communities (Devine, 2015). Many WWOOFing opportunities in LAC often advertise natural beauty nearby, and offer weekend excursions to visit interesting places near the organic farms (FoWo, 2018). In fact, on the WWOOF website for Chile, it has an excerpt from Lonely Planet, categorizing Chile as one of the top places to visit in 2018, due to its varied natural landscapes (FoWO, 2018). This demonstrates that WWOOFing may be facilitating the capitalist intrusions of tourism, and the commodification of new places and environments for the experience of foreigners. The experience of “being an organic farmer” is also commodified through WWOOFing. WWOOFers may WWOOF to escape urban life and learn the farming techniques of local populations, but they are also usually driven by a tourist logic, seeking to consume the natural beauty, lifestyle, and culture of the places they visit

There are additional issues to consider. One is that WWOOFers are providing “free” labor in a new place, and are probably unaware of the potential impacts of this on local economies. This almost free labor could logically lead to the undermining of local employment for people who might have previously relied on these jobs, or could use them now. Another issue is the possible exploitation of WWOOFers and/or the farm hosts; a careful balance needs to be struck between the amount of labor provided and the amount of resources used by WWOOFers, because the relationship between host and volunteer is not clearly defined and depends upon goodwill. This goodwill relationship can allow for farm hosts to exploit the “free” labor of the WWOOFers, or for WWOOFers to take advantage of “free room and board” without providing enough labor in return for the arrangement to be viable for hosts (Smithers, 2011). These minute

economic impacts both to the WWOOFer and by the WWOOFer should be critically evaluated, to ensure the maximum benefits to both parties in the agreement.

In order for WWOOFing to do the most good possible, it must stand on the three “legs” of sustainable development that were mentioned above; it must be environmentally friendly, economically inclusive and viable, and socio-culturally positive. As elaborated in this section, WWOOFing has the potential to bring with it economic benefits, but also economic challenges and harms to local communities and farms. WWOOFing voluntourists must be well-informed and more critically aware of the impact they might have on rural communities in order to help strengthen the “economically viable and inclusive” stool leg of sustainable tourism, rather than weaken it.

#### *Potential Sociocultural Impacts of WWOOFing*

As discussed above, the relationship between WWOOFer and farm owner is not entirely profit-driven but is also based on other social values (Bunn, 2014). This lends itself to the argument that it is necessary to review the social, political, and cultural impacts both on and by WWOOFers. I view social, cultural, and political issues as inherently intertwined, and thus will use the term “sociocultural” as a term that is inclusive of these considerations. Overwhelmingly, hosts and voluntourists report that cultural exchange is one of the main benefits gained from the arrangement of WWOOFing (Bunn, 2014). WWOOFing is advertised as a cultural exchange experience in which new languages can be mastered, local recipes can be shared, and the daily life of locals can be experienced in unique ways (FoWo, 2018). The intergenerational and international networks that are created via WWOOFing are based on shared values such as the importance of organic farming, and ecologically sustainable lifestyles, which fosters the cultural exchange component of WWOOFing (Bunn, 2014).



It has been noted that one of the negative impacts of sustainable voluntourism in LAC is an acceleration of sociocultural and political changes to local communities, and therefore, a disintegration of social cohesion as some community members seek to promote sustainable voluntourism while others are starkly against its implementation (Agüera, 2016). This insertion of foreigners, and the differing opinions of the locals can lead to disruptions in the social fabric, creating social turbulence. If the development of tourism in an area is not community-based, as in the community being the main agent of control then it can lead to divisions in a once unified society and rifts between neighbors based on different economic opportunities, and differing lifestyles (Medrano, 2017).

As foreigners who travel by WWOOFing integrate themselves into their host farms and local communities there are many opportunities for cultural exchange. One aspect of these exchanges that needs to be better analyzed in determining whether WWOOFing can be truly sustainable tourism is whether the culture that the WWOOFers are exposed to is being commodified or altered for them to consume and is therefore lacking in genuineness. WWOOFers should be more aware of the authenticity of their interactions so that they can avoid promoting harmful stereotypes.

Short-term voluntourism stints usually do not create the sustaining, trustful relationships that foster actual cultural exchange as advertised by the WWOOF website (Legan, 2014; FoWO, 2018). The WWOOFers usually stay for such a short amount of time on farms, that any relationships fostered can generally be considered superficial, which is ripe ground for shallow cultural exchange (Zavitz, 2011). WWOOFing can facilitate rapid cultural exchange without leaving time for a thorough understanding of the culture in which foreigners are abruptly inserting themselves, therefore, WWOOFers may leave the experience with a falsified

impression of the culture, and miss an opportunity to legitimately promote cultural understanding; as a result, they may perpetuate harmful stereotypes once they have left the farm stay (Legan, 2014). Arguably, the cultural exchange provided through WWOOFing tends to be a different experience than other cultural exchanges advertised by sustainable voluntourism, because the WWOOFers are living in the actual home of the farm owner and are participating in daily activities, yet the chance that they are shown an altered version of the daily life is still high. WWOOFing implements many of the same review structures as other alternate travel methods such as Air B&B, Couch Surfing, etc.; a good review by a volunteer can result in more people volunteering on a given farm, meaning more labor for that farm, and more money injected in to the local economy via travel costs and extra excursions. This creates an incentive for farm owners who are more profit-driven to create cultural exchange experiences for volunteers that are exaggerated or even fabricated, akin to other forms of voluntourism that sell a falsified chance for cultural exchange (Occhipinti, 2016).

Another concern regarding sociocultural exchange through WWOOFing is that WWOOFers usually lack historical awareness of the geopolitical situation in which they find themselves, which is a problem of voluntourism in general (Legan, 2014). LAC has a historically tumultuous relationship with the Global North, stemming from the colonial period and continuing into the present. The natural resource wealth of Latin America, in the form of gold, silver, oil, timber, and more has been systematically extracted to the benefit of economies of the Global North, resulting in uneven development whereby some places become wealthy at the expense of others (Galeano, 1973). European colonizers crossed the Atlantic, and recognizing the natural wealth of the “New World,” set about extracting through both explicitly and questionable means. This historical pattern of exploitation has been repeated in different ways

since Independence. Today, peasant and indigenous territories in LAC are appropriated for the economic benefit of generally non-indigenous peoples (Borras, 2012). This phenomenon of Land-Grabbing is facilitating all kinds of economic development from natural resource extraction to the construction of tropical resorts for tourism; it is therefore prudent that voluntourists be aware of the historical and contemporary legacy of territorial dispossession and uneven development in the region, and that they ask whether these legacies are relevant to the specific region and situation in which they are WWOOFing. WWOOFers should also understand their country of origin's role in the under-development of LAC (if this applies). Self-reflection on the privilege that allows voluntourists to travel to a "less developed" place is critical for the kind of self-growth and actualization that WWOOFing promotes. These considerations are imperative to gaining a culturally relevant view of the place that the WWOOFer travels to and of the place they come from; having an awareness for these considerations will strengthen the "socioculturally positive leg" that WWOOFing as a form of sustainable tourism must stand if it is to benefit the tourists (WWOOFers), hosts, and local communities.

### **Conclusions and Potential Solutions**

Sustainable voluntourism show no indications of slowing its takeover of large portions of the tourism industry in LAC. If such alternative tourisms are going to play an important economic role in the region, then they should be fully vetted and compared to the standards of sustainable tourism, again, defined as tourism that is economically viable and inclusive, socioculturally positive, and environmentally friendly (Jackiewicz, 2012). A comprehensive consideration of alternative tourisms in LAC should include an analysis of WWOOFing. WWOOFing isn't the most common form of alternative travel globally, but it is substantial

enough in Latin America and the Caribbean that it warrants a place in future analyses of sustainable tourism development in the region.

As discussed in this paper, economically speaking, WWOOFing facilitates the import of foreign nationals in to rural communities in LAC under the pretext of cultural exchange, ecological living, and a unique experience. This causes ripples in the local economy for the volunteer, the farm owner, and the greater local community. These economic ramifications should be fully understood by the WWOOFer so that they are aware of the immediate and far-reaching impacts of their presence in communities. From a sociocultural perspective, WWOOFing opportunities must to be examined to confirm that they are not perpetuating cultural ignorance or stereotypes.

Holding WWOOFing in LAC up to the high standards of sustainable tourism probably would not require large policy changes; instead, changes in the inherent structure of WWOOFing might be the key to avoiding ignorance of WWOOFing's potential economic and sociocultural consequences. As with most of the complex issues in the world dealing with natural resources and the economies and cultures that surround them, education is a principal solution. A community of WWOOFers educated on the implicit and explicit meanings behind their actions would be both more aware and would facilitate a more holistically sustainable experience for themselves, farm hosts, and local communities.

A simple example of how relevant information on the potential pitfalls of voluntourism and on the culture and economic situation of a region can be disseminated to potential WWOOFers is via the WWOOFing website. In fact, just recently the WWOOFing website unveiled a section called Learning and Living on Organic Farms (LLOOF)—a page of the WWOOF website devoted to educating WWOOFers on organic farm life. The site even includes

short instructional videos (LLOOF, 2018). These videos mainly discuss planting techniques, certifications, and basic animal husbandry. However, this page could provide a perfect platform for potential WWOOFers to view informational videos on the relevant cultural and economic climates of the places in which they are considering WWOOFing. Mandating preemptive education for would-be WWOOFers would enhance the WWOOFing experience for individuals, as they could critically evaluate more of their personal experiences. These short educational videos would also benefit local populations and the sustainable tourism industry as a whole, by supporting the development of more educated tourists and moving WWOOFing towards a more sustainable tourism model that has equally strong environmentally friendly, socioculturally positive, and economically viable and inclusive foundations.

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