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Exploring WWOOF Exchange: Meanings and Practices of Ecological Social Network



Mohd Rezza Petra bin Azlan



**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
Durham University**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the meanings and practices of social and ecological engagement within the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network. Moving beyond framings of WWOOF as a cohesive social movement, this study argues that it functions as a dynamic and diverse 'mixed economy of volunteering', where ecological values, knowledge, and ethical commitments are co-produced through situated, relational, and often contradictory practices.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted across six WWOOF-related sites in the UK, supplemented by the analysis of web-based material, particularly online vlogs, the research addresses four interconnected themes. First, it explores how participants establish belonging and temporary yet durable bonds of reciprocal care through embodied practices like shared meals and collaborative work, as well as through digital interactions that foster a sense of community. Second, it examines the complex and often unbalanced dynamics of reciprocity, showing how volunteers and hosts navigate power asymmetries and shifting expectations around labour, learning, and cultural exchange. Third, it analyses care not as an abstract ideal, but as a situated, embodied practice; one that is enacted, negotiated, and sometimes strained or disrupted in both on-farm and digital contexts. Finally, it argues that resilience within the network is not a systemic property but emerges unevenly through the adaptive, situated strategies of participants, often grounded in permaculture ethics rather than the formal WWOOF framework itself.

Most importantly, this thesis contributes a fine-grained ethnographic account of how sustainability is lived, negotiated, and contested in practice, demonstrating that such networks are sustained not by uniform ideals, but by the continuous, messy, and meaningful work of navigating human and ecological relationships.

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ABBREVIATIONS

4G LTE - 4th Generation Long-Term Evolution

ADD - Attention Deficit Disorder

AGM - Annual General Meeting

BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation

CoP - Community of Practice

CSA - Community-Supported Agriculture

FoWO - Federation of WWOOF Organisations

IE - Incredible Edible

LPP - Legitimate Peripheral Participation

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

NWO - National WWOOF Organisation

PhD - Doctor of Philosophy

S.W.T - Subhanahu wa Ta'ala (An honorific for God in Islam)

TAPO - Thoughtful and Protracted Observation

UK - United Kingdom

USA - United States of America

WWOOF - World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms

WTO - World Trade Organization

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and a product of my own research endeavours and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration with others except as explicitly indicated in the text.

No part of this thesis has been submitted to Durham University or any other University or similar institution for any degree, diploma or other qualification.

I warrant that this authorisation does not, to the best of my belief, infringe the rights of any third party.

I certify that my thesis does not exceed the prescribed word limit of 100,000 words for the relevant Degree Committee.

DECLARATION OF AI ASSISTANCE

I acknowledge the use of several AI-based tools during the preparation of this thesis. Specifically, I used Google Translate to translate portions of my initial drafts from Malay into English. I also used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to improve the clarity and grammar of my writing, including rephrasing certain selected passages and suggesting more academically appropriate language. Additionally, I utilised the Connecting Papers website to help discover relevant academic literature by visualising connections between research papers in my field.

These tools were used solely to support language translation, writing enhancement, and literature search. They were not used to generate any original content, analysis or the theoretical framing. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed, edited, and incorporated only where they accurately reflected my intended meaning and analytical direction. No content produced by AI tools has been included in this thesis without thorough human oversight and revision.

The scope of this use was transparently discussed with, and approved by my supervisors, Professor Ben Campbell and Professor Tom Widger, and is described in detail in Appendix E.

I take full academic responsibility for the entire content and interpretation presented in this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A chance encounter with a volunteer in the Welsh countryside nearly a decade ago sparked my interest in the volunteer organisation World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) and laid the groundwork for what would become the focus of my research. This particular volunteer stood out from others I met, who were part of more conventional international volunteering programs. As a WWOOFer, her distinct experience and approach prompted me to question what WWOOF truly was and how it differed from other initiatives. That encounter stayed with me, driving a curiosity that eventually led me to explore WWOOF in greater depth.

Fast forward to 2019, that initial spark had grown into a comprehensive research plan, painstakingly created to fully immerse me in the real-life experiences of WWOOF volunteers and hosts.

Research Focus and Rationale

This study examines WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) as a social network of ecological practices, where sustainability is negotiated through the everyday material acts of farming. It situates WWOOF within a broader mixed economy of volunteering, a term I use to describe the coexistence of diverse aspirations, ethical commitments, and material conditions that shape participation. Through this perspective, the thesis explores how ecological values are co-produced through situated, relational exchanges rather than imposed through formal structures. The thesis focuses on how everyday participation in agricultural tasks gives rise to meaningful connections and evolving understandings of environmental engagement. For instance, one volunteer, during a stay at a permaculture-focused farm, arrived with a theoretically rich but complex understanding of composting, developed through extensive online research into aspects like acid levels, nitrate levels, and heat management. However, a single, practical conversation with an experienced host reframed this specialised, theory heavy knowledge. The host demonstrated a surprisingly simple and effective hands-on method of layering materials and allowing nature to take its course, which also permitted growing directly on the compost bed, an approach the volunteer hadn't previously encountered. This interaction, where abstract online learning was transformed by embodied, experiential insight gained through dialogue with a seasoned practitioner, encapsulates how relationships with both people and ecological processes evolve through the give-and-take of daily farm practice. These interactions, grounded in shared action rather than declared ideology, allow participants to discover how these connections are forged, and meanings are reshaped.

What makes WWOOF compelling is that it neither relies on pre-defined templates of sustainability nor demands uniform adherence to a single ecological model. Instead, it provides a setting where participants, volunteers and hosts, enter with varied aspirations, whether

seeking direct learning, cultural exchange, or a closer link to the food they consume. As they work side-by-side, these individuals confront differing expectations and resource constraints, occasionally encountering disagreements or misunderstandings. By examining how such complexities unfold, this research sheds light on how people reconcile differences through persistent effort and dialogue. The emphasis here is on the network's capacity to accommodate diverse agendas, from small garden plots experimenting with seed-saving techniques to larger holdings that blend organic principles with low-input conventional methods.

Approaching WWOOF through a social network lens broadens the scope beyond conventional top-down frameworks that often emphasise organized collective movements or uniform activist agendas. Instead, attention turns toward the myriad small-scale practices that make the network intelligible and foster belonging. Consider, for example, the shared meal at one UK farm where a simple misunderstanding about the British slang for 'tea' (meaning dinner) evolved, through laughter and shared cooking, into a moment of cultural exchange and the forging of a new friendship between myself and a fellow volunteer. Or, recall the composting session at another site that transformed from a routine task into an impromptu lesson, fundamentally shifting a volunteer's understanding of soil regeneration through direct, practical dialogue with an experienced host. Even the informal advice exchanged digitally, perhaps in a WWOOF-related YouTube vlog's comment section discussing ethical farming dilemmas, extends learning and connection far beyond any single farm stay. These modest interactions offer deep insights into how sustainability takes shape across varied ecological and social settings, offering a contemporary case study that contributes to the comparative anthropology of food growing systems (e.g., Netting, 1993; Pottier, 1999; Richards, 1985; Weismantel, 1998).

By concentrating on lived action and relational exchanges, this research presents WWOOF not as a static entity defined by a single vision of environmental correctness, but as a flexible

platform where environmental values are constantly negotiated. In doing so, it reveals how place-based practices and interpersonal trust are foundational. These elements, combined with mutual learning, build upon one another to shape participants' evolving sense of ecological responsibility. This perspective recognizes that large-scale environmental goals gain traction through both grand campaigns and the small, repeated acts of care, exchange, and reflection embedded in daily farm work.

By tracing how knowledge expectations and experiences circulate among participants, this research reveals that sustainability within WWOOF is not imposed from above, nor assumed as a given, but is crafted through interactions that are at once practical, communicative, and open-ended. By tracing these relational processes ethnographically, the study draws attention to the significance of maintaining an anthropological perspective. Social anthropology, with its commitment to reciprocity and contextual depth, offered an appropriately grounded disciplinary foundation. Theoretical anchors such as Ingold's (2000) notion of 'dwelling' helped to frame WWOOFers' deep, sensory engagement with the land as a process of learning and belonging through active participation, while Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) work on care ethics offered a way to understand the material and moral work involved in 'making live and let die' within these ecological settings. Furthermore, anthropological perspectives on reciprocity [e.g., distinguishing between generalized, balanced, and negative forms of exchange (Sahlins, 1972/2004)] offered crucial tools for analysing the often complex and negotiated nature of give-and-take in non-monetary volunteer contexts.

Indeed, my initial intellectual curiosity, sparked by that chance encounter with a WWOOFer in the Welsh countryside nearly a decade ago whose distinct experience prompted fundamental questions about this mode of volunteering, initially led me to frame WWOOF through the lens of voluntourism. This early framing was further explored and then intentionally broadened

during my doctoral journey. The opportunity to develop this PhD within an institution and with supervisors who possessed anthropological expertise as well as direct, historical connections to WWOOF (including as a past host) proved highly beneficial, fostering a move towards more nuanced understanding instead of simplistic labels. What began as an exploration potentially situated within existing voluntourism debates: a theme which, having served its foundational purpose in the literature review, gives way to a more specific ethnographic focus, thus broadened into a deeper engagement with WWOOF as a dynamic social network of ecological practices and a key site within what I term a ‘mixed economy of volunteering.’ This evolving perspective, nurtured within a supportive academic environment, allows the thesis to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how ecological engagement emerges in contexts marked by uncertainty, ongoing negotiation, and the co-creation of meaning through shared work and dialogue. While this study focuses primarily on the UK WWOOF context, with ethnographic fieldwork conducted across six UK-based sites, references to the wider international WWOOF network are used for contextual and comparative purposes rather than as the primary object of analysis. The insights into relational dynamics and adaptive volunteering practices offer valuable insights for facilitating ethical and enriching voluntourism or quasi-WWOOF opportunities in diverse settings by emphasizing collaborative ethics.

Research Objectives and Questions

The core aim of this thesis is to understand how participants within the WWOOF network navigate ecological values through their embodied work, conversations, and adaptations, moving beyond simplistic views of WWOOF as merely a volunteer tourism mechanism or a technical training platform. The focus remains steadfastly on the lived, everyday practices that shape these engagements.

The primary objective guiding this research is to uncover how volunteers and hosts navigate and make sense of their roles, develop new skills or perspectives, and ultimately integrate these insights into their broader worldviews. I ask: In what ways do WWOOF participants find meaning in their involvement, and how do the ecological tasks and relationships encountered influence their sense of purpose and identity? This line of questioning leads to a closer examination of several intertwined themes. I explore how notions of belonging are nurtured or challenged. I investigate the different forms of exchange, from labour to cultural insights, and how they unfold and sometimes collide. I also examine how care, expressed through both tangible farm work and subtle acts of kindness, shapes ecological engagement. Finally, I analyse how the network demonstrates resilience and adaptability, particularly when faced with disruptions like a global pandemic that require new modes of participation.

Taken together, these inquiries revolve around a central question: Why and how do people engage in WWOOF, and what meanings do they derive from these encounters? The participants themselves, as this research will show, are a diverse group, varying in age, nationality, socio-economic background, and motivation, from young international travellers on a budget to older individuals seeking career changes or deeper connection with nature, as encountered both in existing WWOOF literature, the analysed vlogs, and during my own UK-based fieldwork. To experiences, I consider sub-questions that bring specificity to the analysis. How do such diverse participants negotiate their relationships, especially when their initial assumptions meet the realities of farm life? How do they adjust to unforeseen challenges and unforeseen constraints? How do they reconcile their ideals about sustainable agriculture with the messy, context-specific tasks that define their daily work?

These lines of investigation highlight how environmental learning and ethical engagement are generated and sustained within a decentralised community. By exploring how participants

collectively generate ecological knowledge and practices, I aim to show that WWOOF fosters meaningful connections and adaptive capabilities without relying on rigid directives. Most importantly, this study explores how, through the interplay of practice, WWOOF participants enrich both their own understanding of sustainability and contribute to the evolving ecological thought and practice in a world constantly shaped by change, and how nuanced ecological values emerge organically from their lived experience. These dynamics are examined through analysis of fieldwork material: drawn from interviews and observations, which traces how learning and meaning-making unfold within the contingencies of everyday life on WWOOF farms.

Theoretical Overview

As I approach this research, I've found that no single theoretical lens fully captures the complexity of how WWOOF participants learn, relate, and adapt through their agricultural encounters. Instead, I turn to several overlapping frameworks that, when taken together help make sense of the everyday workings of this network.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold's (2000) notion of dwelling, for instance, encourages a view of human-environment relationships built not on abstract ideals, but on the tangible acts of working the land. Tasks like planting seeds or rotating crops become opportunities for participants to develop an embodied understanding of their place in an ecological context. Such learning is not just technical; it involves a sensory and emotional response to the immediate conditions of the farm. This creates an intimate process that transforms sustainable farming from an abstract idea into something palpably experienced.

In a similar vein, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning and communities of practice (CoP) helps me to unpack how participants gain knowledge. Instead of top-down instruction, volunteers and hosts learn together by doing. A new volunteer might

initially be uncertain about a particular cultivation method, but by observing a host's techniques and engaging in trial-and-error, they gradually internalize both skills and values. Knowledge here is social and fluid, shaped by everyday cues. Over time, participants co-create a shared repertoire of insights and methods, blending old traditions with new interpretations.

The emphasis is less on formal pedagogy and more on learning as a communal endeavour entwined with the landscape itself. This understanding of collective engagement, where shared tasks are central to social learning, resonates with anthropological insights that challenge purely individualistic economic models. A compelling, if contrasting, parallel can be found in Ben Campbell's (1994) work on reciprocal work groups among Tamang farmers in Nepal. There, he found that cooperation was not driven by an ideal of social cohesion, but by a pragmatic recognition from farmers that it was simply too difficult to grow food alone. Campbell's ethnography shows that people will come together out of necessity even in the absence of complete social harmony (Campbell, 1994). This very act of shared work, whether motivated by idealism as it often is in WWOOF, or by pragmatism as in the Nepali context, creates the fundamental social space where an ethic of care can be built through practice.

Care, as articulated by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), introduces another dimension. In WWOOF, tending to plants and soil also entails nurturing human relationships. Care emerges in routine gestures, a patient explanation of how to compost properly, a shared meal after a long day's labour, or a gentle willingness to accommodate cultural differences. These acts of care extend beyond professional courtesy: they help participants see that working sustainably involves moral and emotional commitments, not just strategic or technical knowhow. This ethical dimension, woven into practical tasks, demonstrates how participants are not simply learning to grow food; they're also learning to live and act more thoughtfully within a broader community, human and nonhuman alike.

Finally, resilience theory offers a lens to understand how WWOOF navigates disruptions and changing circumstances. During global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, participants have shown that when face-to-face encounters become difficult, they can still rely on adaptive networks that preserve the essence of their ecological engagements. On many farms within the volunteer network, especially those deeply invested in regenerative approaches, adaptive capacities are often rooted in permaculture ethics. These are guided by specific design principles, including diverse system design and resource cycling. Central to this philosophy is an emphasis on the core tenets of 'people care, earth care, and fair share.' Together, these principles inherently foster an environment of flexibility and local attunement. Rather than turning to rigid protocols, the network thus responds through adaptability in the relationships and shared ecological knowledge that have accumulated over time. Resilience here is not a quality that people or farms possess in isolation, but something emerging from their collective ability to iterate their approaches to caring for land and community, even under novel constraints (Walker et al., 2004).

Taken together, these four perspectives: dwelling, situated learning, care, and resilience, provide the analytical scaffolding for this thesis, enabling an understanding of WWOOF as more than an assortment of organic farms and traveling volunteers. They allow this research to move beyond depicting WWOOF as simply a network for labour exchange or alternative tourism, and instead to illuminate it as a dynamic social field where ecological subjectivities and ethical commitments are actively forged. The core argument of this thesis, therefore, is that participants come to appreciate and enact ecological principles not through formal instruction, but through direct, lived experience. This happens fundamentally through four intertwined processes: embodied action in daily farm work; nuanced relational learning with hosts and peers; the cultivation of an ethical attentiveness towards both human and non-human others; and the development of adaptive responses to the uncertainties of agricultural life. This research

makes an original contribution by ethnographically detailing these intertwined processes, demonstrating how meaning, care, and resilience are co-produced through the give-and-take of these situated interactions. The result is a nuanced view of sustainability as a lived and often improvised process, shaped by ongoing adjustments and meaningful exchanges that unfold in the fields, around shared tables, and through the diverse networks of communication that connect them. It is important to acknowledge, that WWOOF, while the central focus of this study, operates within a broader landscape of ecological engagement; it is one significant, and often highly visible, current in a wider river that includes other forms of volunteer work, informal farm helping, community-supported agriculture, and diverse hosting organisations, all contributing to what can be understood as a 'mixed economy of volunteering'. Two concepts are particularly important for the analysis that follows and are developed in greater depth in later chapters. First, the notion of a 'mixed economy of volunteering' is introduced here as a framing device and elaborated in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6 to examine how ecological volunteering operates across overlapping moral, social, and economic registers. Second, resilience is treated not as an abstract system property but as an emergent and uneven process, a perspective that is explored empirically in Chapter 8 through participants' responses to disruption, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Structure of the Thesis

The following chapters provide a pathway through the contextual, theoretical and empirical terrain of this research, each contributing insights that build toward a nuanced understanding of WWOOF as a social network of ecological practices operating within a broader mixed economy of volunteering.

Chapter 2, "Context and Background," begins this journey by delving into the historical and social background of WWOOF. It traces the network's evolution from its origins in the UK to

its global presence, highlighting its operational diversity, the variety of farm types and guiding philosophies (from smallholdings to permaculture sites and intentional communities), and the different roles volunteers undertake. Crucially, this chapter situates WWOOF within a wider ecosystem of volunteer work and alternative hosting organisations, acknowledging from the outset that WWOOF, while central to this study, is one prominent node in a more extensive and varied landscape of ecological and agricultural exchange. This contextual grounding, which also introduces the specific fieldwork sites and key ethnographic participants of this research, is essential for understanding how place, scale, and cultural factors influence the experiences of those who engage with these networks.

Chapter 3, “Literature Review,” then establishes the conceptual tools for the thesis. It begins by situating WWOOF within existing scholarship. The review engages with broad academic debates on sustainability and alternative food movements, as well as theories of situated learning and ecological engagement, including the network's complex relationship with voluntourism. Drawing on literature, the spans anthropology and environmental studies and social theory, this chapter critically reviews how WWOOF has been framed and identifies key gaps, particularly the need for more fine-grained, participant-centered analyses of lived practices. It thereby lays the groundwork for interpreting how everyday tasks and interpersonal exchanges shape participants’ ecological perspectives and their experiences of reciprocity, care, and resilience.

Chapter 4, “Methodology,” outlines how I approached the research, explaining the qualitative methods employed and how the pandemic required adaptive strategies. Analysis of web-based material, participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations, supplemented by thematic analysis, allowed me to capture both the embodied dimension of ecological learning and the significance of digital interactions that transcend physical settings.

Building on this methodological foundation, the analytical chapters (Chapters 5–8) explore key thematic areas. Chapter 5, “Belonging and Relatedness,” focuses on how participants establish connections and a sense of place, examining how seemingly mundane activities like composting or seed saving, shared meals, and digital expressions become moments of shared meaning and the forging of fictive kinship. Chapter 6, “Reciprocity, Power Dynamics, and Economic Exchange,” addresses the delicate balance of exchanging labour for knowledge and cultural insights. It reveals how hosts and volunteers must negotiate their respective roles while managing mutual expectations and responsibilities, reflecting larger questions of fairness and dependency within the “mixed economies” at play. Turning to Chapter 7, “Care and Sustainability in Ecological Practices,” I examine how ethical sensibilities and ecological principles are enacted in practice, showing that sustainability emerges as something participants do and relate to, rather than merely contemplate. Finally, Chapter 8, “Resilience and Adaptation within the WWOOF Network,” looks closely at how participants and farm sites respond to challenges, including global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating that adaptability depends not just on resourcefulness but on relationships, local networks and established ecological ethics like permaculture.

Chapter 9, “Conclusion,” brings these threads together, reflecting on what these findings mean for understanding WWOOF as a social network of ecological practices embedded within a diverse volunteering landscape. It evaluates how the research contributes to theoretical discussions on sustainability and relational learning. The conclusion also considers the interconnected concepts of care, reciprocity, and resilience. Finally, the conclusion offers practical recommendations for WWOOF and similar initiatives, suggesting ways to improve communication, integrate learning opportunities more intentionally, and use digital resources to strengthen collaboration. In doing so, it points toward broader implications for how environmental engagement can be nurtured across various contexts, including associative and

mobile practices such as voluntourism, and how these models might adapt to emerging environmental and social challenges.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

I arrived at the Todmorden Library on time, slightly unsure if I was at the right place. Tracie was already waiting outside, smiling, wanting to make sure I didn't get lost. On the way there, I passed several hand-painted book cabinets scattered around town: one shaped like a miniature lighthouse, another wrapped in stars and bunting. Todmorden, I later learned, describes itself as a "book town," and these "Incredible Little Libraries" are part of its landscape of everyday sharing. Inside the quiet warmth of the library, Tracie recounted her two decades of WWOOFing on small farms around the UK. "I enjoy working outside," she told me, "and I like learning things. Also, because I live by myself, it's nice to go and stay with a family." What stayed with me was how her story: simple and sincere, captured the slow, enduring threads that tie people to places, and how acts of care, learning, and exchange are often carried in the smallest gestures.



Figure 1: Incredible Little Libraries, Book Sharing Boxes Located Across Todmorden Town

The Genesis and Evolution of WWOOF

This chapter provides a crucial contextual grounding for the thesis, as WWOOF defies easy classification and shifts dramatically across regions and actors. While often portrayed as an idealistic space, this chapter also signals its complexities particularly in the way its ethos of sustainability and mutual aid sits uneasily at times with tensions surrounding unpaid labour. By highlighting these tensions from the outset, the aim is to position WWOOF not as a closed, utopian system, but as a mixed economy of volunteering shaped by diverse aspirations, power dynamics, and situated negotiations.

By “mixed economy of volunteering,” this thesis draws on J. K. Gibson-Graham’s (2005) work on diverse economies, which challenges the assumption that economic life is organised primarily through capitalist market relations. Their approach draws attention to the wide range of non-market practices through which livelihoods are sustained, including reciprocal labour, household production, gifting, cooperation, and volunteer work. The term *mixed* is used here to signal how these different forms of value and exchange come together in practice within volunteering arrangements, rather than appearing as separate or parallel systems. In the case of WWOOF, labour, care, learning, hospitality, and subsistence are frequently entangled in everyday interactions between hosts and volunteers. Describing WWOOF as part of a mixed economy of volunteering makes it possible to attend to these overlapping registers of exchange and to recognise that participation is shaped simultaneously by ethical commitments, practical needs, and relational expectations, without reducing the exchange to either altruism or employment. To situate these dynamics historically, the chapter first traces the origins and early development of WWOOF, before situating its expansion within broader alternative food and farming landscapes.

WWOOF Exchange itself is a pioneering network that epitomises the transformative power of grassroots initiatives in addressing ecological social and educational challenges. Its origins trace back to 1971, when Sue Coppard, a secretary living in London, envisioned a way to bridge the gap between urban residents and rural organic farms. Her idea, briefly introduced earlier through her own recollections of the first weekend at a Sussex farm, reflected a personal yearning to reconnect with the land and a desire to share that experience with others. At the time, organic farming was a marginal movement, largely overshadowed by industrial agricultural practices. Coppard's vision was deeply personal, born from her own frustration with urban life and inspired by ecological values. Her solution was both simple and revolutionary: to create opportunities for urban volunteers to spend weekends working on organic farms in exchange for meals, lodging, and a hands-on education in sustainable agriculture. This initiative, initially called "Working Weekends on Organic Farms," allowed volunteers to contribute their labour to farms that often struggled to find affordable, skilled help. By connecting city dwellers with the rhythms of rural life, WWOOF addressed practical labour shortages while fostering an appreciation for organic farming and sustainable living.

In its early years, WWOOF remained modest in scale, catering primarily to individuals seeking short-term engagements. The weekend-based format was designed to accommodate urban workers who had limited time but a strong interest in participating. The simple satisfaction Coppard recalled of doing something useful with one's hands continues to surface in the reflections of long-time WWOOFer like Tracie, the veteran volunteer introduced in this chapter's opening vignette, whose motivations, even decades later, echo that original spirit. However, the potential of this model quickly became evident as volunteers sought longer-term opportunities and the network's popularity grew. To reflect this expanding scope, the program underwent a series of name changes that paralleled its evolution. In the 1980s, the shift to "Willing Workers on Organic Farms" signalled a broadening mission that extended beyond

weekends, emphasizing the active role of volunteers in supporting farm operations. Yet, the term “workers” suggested a transactional relationship: one that undercut the ethos of mutual learning and cultural exchange that WWOOF sought to cultivate. Moreover, the label triggered confusion with immigration authorities in several countries, with WWOOFers increasingly questioned about work permits at borders. In response, the acronym was redefined in the early 2000s as “World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms”, a name that better encapsulated the program’s global reach and its dual emphasis on opportunity and community. This latest iteration reflects WWOOF’s broader mission to connect individuals not just with farms but with a shared vision of sustainability and reciprocity. At the same time, the ongoing evolution of its name and identity illustrates the difficulty of compartmentalising the network and highlights the value of a bottom-up analytical approach in capturing its fluidity and diversity.

The transition from a local initiative to a global network began in earnest during the 1980s, a period marked by growing public interest in sustainability and ecological living. This expansion was driven by both demand from volunteers and the increasing recognition of WWOOF as a vital resource for organic farms. The establishment of national organisations in countries such as Canada, Japan, and New Zealand helped formalize the network, enabling it to address region-specific challenges while maintaining its commitment to the principles of organic agriculture. By the early 2000s, WWOOF had established a significant presence in the United States, further solidifying its status as a global network. Today, WWOOF operates through a flexible structure that includes national chapters and the WWOOF Independents program, which supports farms in countries without formal organisations. This structure enables a balance between local adaptability and global cohesion, allowing individual groups to tailor their operations to local conditions while benefiting from the visibility and collaboration of a worldwide network.

WWOOF's flexible and adaptive approach is a cornerstone of its success. As Cheryl Lans (2016) notes, this model allows the network to maintain its core values while adapting to diverse contexts. This flexibility is especially important given the labour-intensive nature of organic farming, which relies on manual effort to manage soil health, control pests, and harvest crops sustainably. Unlike industrial agriculture, which often depends on chemical inputs and large-scale machinery, organic farming prioritizes ecological integrity, a goal that requires significant human involvement. By connecting farms with enthusiastic volunteers, WWOOF alleviates labour shortages while also enriches the farming experience through cultural and educational exchange.

For some hosts, WWOOF provides a lifeline, offering the labour necessary to sustain operations without compromising their commitment to organic principles. For volunteers, the network offers opportunities to engage directly with sustainable food systems while travelling. Participants gain practical skills while also learning about the broader ecological and social implications of organic agriculture. Lans (2016) describes this dynamic as part of a broader "care economy," where the relationships nurtured through WWOOF extend beyond agricultural productivity to encompass social and emotional well-being. This care economy reflects a deeper ethos within WWOOF, the recognition that resilience and sustainability are not just ecological imperatives but also social and relational practices.

As WWOOF grew, its impact extended far beyond the fields where volunteers and hosts collaborated. The network became a global platform for promoting sustainable agriculture and fostering environmental stewardship. By encouraging participants to immerse themselves in the practices and philosophies of organic farming, WWOOF has helped cultivate a generation of individuals who carry forward these principles into their own lives and communities. This educational aspect is not incidental but central to WWOOF's mission, which seeks to empower

individuals with the knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully to sustainability efforts. The evolution of WWOOF also highlights its role as a quiet resistance to industrialised agricultural systems. By prioritizing small-scale, community-oriented farming practices over profit-driven models, WWOOF challenges the commodification of agriculture and reaffirms the value of ecological integrity and cultural exchange. The dual focus on practicality and philosophy has enabled WWOOF to thrive as a flexible network of ecological practices. It provides a model for how grassroots initiatives can scale globally without losing their core values, offering a vision of sustainability that is both locally rooted and globally connected. These broad achievements, however, sit alongside challenges and complexities that do not always align with WWOOF's founding values.

Furthermore, WWOOF's enduring relevance lies in its ability to navigate the complex intersections between practical support for farms, cultural exchange for volunteers and a shared commitment to ecological stewardship. By attempting to bridge divides between urban and rural, local and global, individual and community, WWOOF aspires to function as a network capable of fostering more sustainable futures. Yet, these ambitions are not without tension. As the following chapters will explore, the relationships WWOOF cultivates are shaped as much by constraints as by its ideals. Rather than taking WWOOF's mission at face value, this thesis engages with the contradictions embedded within its structure: treating the network not as a blueprint for ecological harmony, but as a dynamic and contested space where the meanings of sustainability, reciprocity, and care are continuously negotiated. These negotiations form the core of the ethnographic analysis that follows, with the complexities of reciprocity examined in Chapter 6, and the lived practices of care and sustainability explored in detail in Chapter 7.

WWOOF's Structure and Operational Diversity

While often described as a singular global network, WWOOF more accurately functions through a decentralised federation of largely autonomous national WWOOF organisations (NWOs), regional hubs, and the WWOOF Independents program, which facilitates connections in countries without a formal national body. Each NWO operates independently, sharing a general set of WWOOF values and practices, but often tailoring its approach and legal structure to local contexts. For example, WWOOF UK operates as a registered charity governed by a Board of Trustees, WWOOF France is an association with a volunteer board and salaried staff, and WWOOF Australia has functioned as a for-profit entity. The Federation of WWOOF Organisations (FoWO) serves as an international umbrella body, established around 2012, aiming to 'unite, promote, protect, and support the WWOOF movement' globally and encourage adherence to common principles, though it does not dictate the specific operations of its member NWOs. In countries with established NWOs, coordination between hosts and volunteers (including membership systems, host vetting, local support, dispute resolution, and communication channels) is handled primarily at this national level. Governance within these NWOs typically involves formal processes like Annual General Meetings (AGMs), which are primarily for the legal entity's members (often hosts and organisational directors) rather than for transient WWOOFer volunteers.

Furthermore, direct local support for hosts and volunteers varies; while some NWOs like WWOOF France utilise 'regional referents' and WWOOF UK has in the past mentioned 'Regional Host Coordinators,' a standardised, universally implemented system of dedicated regional liaisons is not a prominent feature across the WWOOF network, with support often being centralised at the national office or delivered through proactive national programs like WWOOF Canada's host approval processes. This flexible, federated arrangement allows farms to participate in the network without needing to conform to a rigid, centralised global structure.

Volunteers, in turn, primarily navigate these national systems (or WWOOF Independents) through their respective digital platforms, which provide access to farm profiles, project descriptions, accommodation details, and mutual reviews.

Across both national and independent structures, platformisation has become increasingly central to how WWOOF operates. That is, relationships between hosts and volunteers are now largely organised through digital platforms that mediate access and communication. In practice, volunteers sign-up and browse searchable host listings by country, project type, or availability. Hosts, in turn, upload information about their farms, describe expectations for tasks, and indicate accommodation arrangements. Messaging, agreements, and reviews typically happen through internal interactions, and visibility is shaped by interface design and, in some cases, algorithmic ordering, such as which hosts appear more prominently in search results. This shift mirrors broader trends in digital matching economies, including platforms like Couchsurfing or Workaway, where experiences are shaped as much by online infrastructure as by shared values. Yet WWOOF continues to distinguish itself by emphasising its ethos. Still, the outcomes vary with key variables. Depending on host motivations, digital literacy, and wider cultural norms, the same platform can facilitate mutual understanding or create mismatches in expectations.

Types of Farm Structures

Although WWOOF is often described in terms of its global scope, the day-to-day experience of volunteering is mediated most immediately through the structure and organisation of individual farms. These micro-contexts shape how work is distributed, how hospitality is extended, and how volunteers are positioned within the life of the farm. The material conditions, ranging from household kitchens to shared communal spaces, as well as the relational dynamics between hosts and volunteers, play a critical role in defining what

WWOOFing feels like on the ground. Some farms operate as intimate, intergenerational households where the lines between guest, worker, and family blur. Others reflect cooperative or communal models, where land, labour, and decision-making are shared more explicitly. Based on my fieldwork, I identify several recurring structural forms that reveal how distinct dynamics give rise to distinct social rhythms, expectations, and possibilities for connection.

Smallholder and Family-Run Farms

A large portion of WWOOF hosts are smallholder or family-run operations, typically working with limited land area and relying on diverse, labour-intensive production methods. These farms often combine ecological commitments with economic precarity, and while some operate as lifestyle projects, others rely more heavily on WWOOF labour to sustain seasonal productivity. Based on my fieldwork across various UK sites, I observed that these hosts frequently integrate volunteers into the intimate rhythms of domestic life. Volunteers in these settings often live with their hosts, share meals at the family table, and participate in tasks that blend food production with everyday maintenance like cooking, cleaning, animal care, and garden work.

Learning in these environments tends to be tacit and experiential, built through repetition, observation, and informal conversation rather than structured instruction. Tasks such as compost turning, bed preparation, seed saving, or jam-making are often demonstrated once and then repeated across days or weeks, reinforcing embodied familiarity with seasonal routines. Indeed, such close exchanges can foster mutual belonging and hands-on learning, as suggested by research on WWOOF encounters (McIntosh and Bonnemann, 2006). This setting also produces a particular relational dynamic: volunteers may be treated as “part of the household” in some cases, while in others the boundary between guest, helper, and labourer remains ambiguous or even awkwardly negotiated. The blurring of these roles, particularly during

extended stays can lead to feelings of inclusion and belonging, but also, at times, to uncertainty around limits. Furthermore, many of these smaller, community-oriented farms serve as vital anchors for local food systems, reducing reliance on global supply chains. This localized production can enhance food sovereignty, ensuring communities maintain greater control over their resources and food destinies (Lans, 2016).

Cooperatives and Communal Models

Some WWOOF hosts are run as cooperatives or shared-ownership farms, where land, infrastructure, and labour are managed according to collective principles. These farms often reflect a more formalized social structure, grounded in collectivism. In these contexts, decision-making may occur through consensus or rotating facilitation roles, and tasks are frequently organised through pre-established systems: whiteboards, rotas, or group meetings.

Volunteers entering these spaces often find themselves adapting to established routines, such as scheduled check-ins, shared mealtimes, or rotating domestic duties. Based on my observations, integration into these systems can be smooth and collaborative, but it also requires a degree of social literacy: knowing how to participate without overstepping, how to take initiative without disrupting established dynamics. It's also notable that within such collective models, particularly in settings such as housing co-operatives or educational organisations where multiple people might supervise volunteers, the volunteer's experience can depend as much on the interpersonal style or availability of their specific supervisor on any given day as on the overarching philosophy of the farm itself. In some cases, the structure helps volunteers feel part of something larger; in others, it may feel impersonal or bureaucratic compared to more intimate, family-run environments. These models tend to prioritise self-sufficiency and collective sustainability over profit-making, although the intensity and efficiency of their labour regimes may rival more commercial farms. WWOOF UK, for

instance, lists several housing cooperatives and worker collectives among its hosts, each reflecting different interpretations of shared ecological living.

Intentional Communities and Eco-Villages

Another subset of WWOOF hosts includes intentional communities, often based on ecological spiritual and social philosophies. These sites, ranging from cohousing groups to eco-villages tend to integrate farming with alternative living arrangements, sometimes combining organic production with communal kitchens, non-monetary economies, or shared childcare. Volunteers in these settings may find themselves immersed in agriculture and in broader lifestyle experiments, engaging with questions of governance, ecological ethics, and community making.

In addition to their organisational structures, WWOOF farms also vary in the guiding philosophies that shape how cultivation is understood and practiced. These perspectives shape not just what is grown, but how sustainability and food practices are interpreted within everyday life on the farm. Some hosts align with defined systems such as organic or permaculture, while others work more intuitively or blend multiple approaches depending on local realities. Attending to these guiding frameworks offers further insight into the diversity of farm environments and the kinds of experiences WWOOFers may encounter.

Farming Philosophies and Production Styles

Within the broader structural diversity of WWOOF hosts lies a more nuanced layer of variation. The philosophies and production styles that underpin how farms engage with land, food, and learning are diverse, and these approaches shape both growing methods and hosts' overall practices. What unites them is a shared departure from industrialised agriculture, albeit expressed in different degrees and registers. The WWOOF UK platform itself, for instance,

showcases host descriptions such as "Organic vegetable and cut flower farm" and "No-dig Market Garden," and provides search filters that point to distinct "Methods or systems," further illustrating this variety. Based on my field observations and evidence from such WWOOF platform features, I identify several recurring frameworks, ranging from organic and permaculture to biodynamic and regenerative models that shaped both the material practices and the cultural atmospheres of the farms I encountered, particularly within the UK context. The very idea of sustainability, as explored further in this thesis, resists singular definition; within WWOOF, it is enacted in diverse ways, ranging from detailed soil care and efforts towards food sovereignty to forms of spiritual ecology and practices of embodied repair.

Organic Farming

Most WWOOF hosts claim to operate using organic principles, and this is foundational to the network; WWOOF UK host listings, for example, feature many farms identifying as "Organic vegetable and cut flower farm" or similar in their primary description. However, as formal certification can be costly and complex, relatively few hosts across the broader WWOOF network are formally certified. Organic hosts typically avoid chemical inputs and follow agro-ecological cycles. Nevertheless, interpretations of "organic" within the WWOOF network are not uniform. Given that formal certification is not a universal requirement for hosts and oversight is largely decentralised, on-the-ground practices can range from minimal adherence to core organic principles to highly developed, deeply integrated ecological farming systems. This ambiguity reinforces the need for volunteers to navigate expectations in context.



Figure 2: Garden beds covered with horticultural fleece, illustrating organic methods for crop protection and season extension

Permaculture Systems

Permaculture is a design-based approach developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren (1978/1990) and represents a prominent organisational model among WWOOF hosts in the UK. Its presence is visible on the WWOOF UK platform, where “permaculture” appears as a searchable “method or system.” Farms identifying with permaculture typically prioritise long-term system design, resource cycling, and landscape-level integration. Common features include swales, food forests, companion planting, perennial crops, and natural building techniques.

Alongside these material features, permaculture is widely associated with an explicit ethical framework. Fox (2013) describes permaculture ethics as a form of “commons thinking,” centred on relational responsibility, restraint, and collective flourishing as alternatives to growth-oriented models of progress. In Fox’s account, permaculture ethics are worked through

everyday practices of sharing land, managing resources, and sustaining relationships over time. Ethics take shape through how space is organised, how responsibilities are assumed, and how ecological futures are held in common.

Among WWOOF hosts, this ethical framing often informs how farms are organised and presented to volunteers, particularly in relation to learning, responsibility, and care. Many permaculture hosts describe their farms as educational spaces rather than solely productive sites. Volunteers may be asked to stay for longer periods, take on a wider range of tasks, or participate in workshops and training activities as part of the exchange. Lans (2016) notes that this type of immersive volunteering has been associated with participants developing a greater awareness of environmental practices and alternative sustainability approaches.

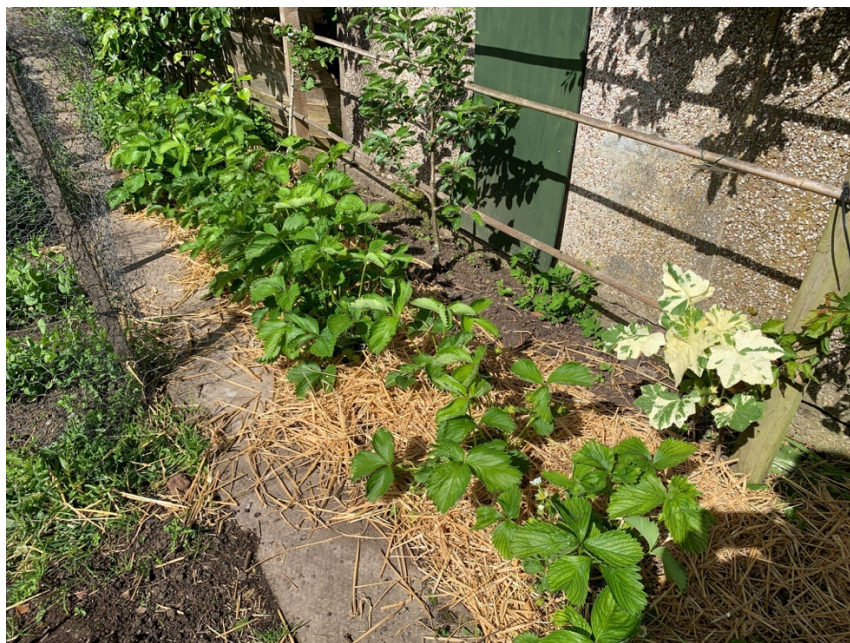


Figure 3: Multi-layered planting, showcasing permaculture principles with strawberries and a young fruit tree

Biodynamic Agriculture

Some hosts follow biodynamic methods, a form of spiritual-ecological agriculture rooted in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical teachings. The presence of such farms is confirmed by its inclusion as a filterable "Method or system" like "Biodynamic agriculture" on the WWOOF UK website, and listings also appear on other national WWOOF websites and platforms like WWOOF Independents. These farms observe lunar planting calendars, use specific herbal preparations (e.g., horn manure and yarrow tea), and frame agriculture as a cosmically aligned practice (Diver, 1999). Volunteers on biodynamic farms may participate in rituals such as "stirring" preparations and spreading composts, offering a distinct experiential contrast to mainstream organics.

No-Dig, Regenerative, and Educational Gardens

Newer philosophies, such as regenerative agriculture and no-dig gardening, have also gained traction among WWOOF hosts. These systems move beyond simply avoiding harm and instead focus on actively improving the ecosystem, particularly through practices that build soil health and enhance biodiversity. Some hosts identify explicitly with this movement, drawing on the principles and practices of key figures like Allan Savory and Jody Butterfield, in their foundational work on holistic management (1999), and Gabe Brown, who detailed his journey in *Dirt to Soil* (2018). Others operate educational gardens or urban microfarms, often in back gardens or small allotments, which may employ these or other ecological methods. Volunteers in these diverse contexts may be involved in public-facing programmes, school garden projects, or low-input household food production. Furthermore, "Community-supported agriculture (CSA)" is another operational model identifiable as a "Method or system" within WWOOF UK listings, often overlapping with these ecological farming philosophies.

Volunteer Roles and Farm Life

The role of the volunteer within WWOOF farms is shaped not only by formal expectations but by a wide range of contextual factors such as seasonality, farm scale, host preferences, and local resource constraints. While the exchange is nominally structured around a fixed number of work hours in return for food and accommodation, what this means in practice can vary significantly. The daily rhythm of tasks, the level of instruction or autonomy, and even the physical conditions of the stay often reflect the host's personal approach to work, hospitality, and sustainability. As such, "volunteering" within WWOOF is not a uniform role, but a fluid and negotiated position that is deeply embedded in the everyday life of the farm.

While WWOOF sets general guidelines typically 4 to 6 hours of labour per day in exchange for food and accommodation, the lived experience of volunteering differs considerably across sites. On larger-scale organic farms, for example, volunteers might handle orchard harvesting or manage livestock according to certification standards, learning how eco-friendly methods can be scaled up (Terry, 2014). Some farms offer private rooms, clear schedules, and clearly defined tasks; others favour flexibility. Spring and summer tend to bring intensive planting, weeding, and harvesting, while winter work often shifts toward upkeep.

Volunteers might be asked to perform a range of activities: sowing seeds, turning compost, feeding animals, harvesting vegetables, pruning fruit trees, building fences, repairing polytunnels, or cooking communal meals. These tasks are both physical and social, often serving as sites where relationships and trust are formed, or in some cases, strained. The engagement in such embodied tasks can also offer a profound sense of meaning and ecological connection that transcends abstract ethics, as accounts of "working" on organic farms

sometimes highlight¹. As some interviews and WWOOF forums suggest, hosts interpret the idea of “exchange” in uneven ways, ranging from collaborative mentorship to exploitative dependency. Some volunteers find deep fulfilment and belonging; others report feelings of underappreciation, confusion, or fatigue. Indeed, research documents how mismatches between volunteer expectations for immersive, knowledge-rich experiences and hosts who may be more focused on efficiency or labour needs can create tension (Wengel, 2018).



Figure 4: Common physical task on organic farms

The host's underlying values (guiding philosophy) and principles significantly define the farm environment. These principles shape how volunteers are welcomed, supervised, or given space to explore. The variability of experience makes WWOOF both appealing and, at times, unpredictable. This dual nature emphasises the importance of clear communication and mutual expectation-setting before and during placements. The informal learning inherent in these farm roles has a rich history. In the days before the widespread use of the internet, WWOOF farms often served as vital, informal hubs of ecological learning, their shelves frequently lined with

¹ See George Monbiot, We're Not Materialistic Enough, The Guardian (29 May 1999), for a reflection on how physical labour and ecological immersion can reorient our relationship to the material world. His account of working on an organic farm explains how embodied tasks like scything, cider-making, or planting can offer a sense of meaning and ecological connection beyond abstract ethics.

practical guides like Lawrence Hills' *Organic Gardening* (1977) and John Seymour's *Self-Sufficiency* (1973), alongside influential works such as Fukuoka's *One-Straw Revolution* (1978), Wendell Berry's *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), Lady Eve Balfour's *The Living Soil* (1943), and King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (1911/2004). But this learning extended beyond the printed page. Early WWOOF networks relied on analogue infrastructures: printed pamphlets, newsletters, and host directories, which were mailed to members and contained farm listings, practical expectations, and ethical framings. These physical materials grounded the movement in tactile and localized practices of knowledge sharing. This ethos of shared, situated knowledge continues today, through expanded channels. These channels circulate through traditional means like books and kitchen tables. They also operate dynamically across online platforms, ranging from informal blogs and comment threads to dedicated forums like Reddit's r/WWOOF. On these platforms, contemporary volunteers share experiences, ask critical questions, and offer practical advice in real time.

Fieldwork Ethnographic Overview: Sites and People

This section introduces the key sites and people that form the social and ecological world of this research. While analysis of these encounters unfolds in the later chapters, the aim here is to offer a grounded sense of the fieldwork landscape, the texture of volunteering. Across six WWOOF-related sites in England, I engaged with a wide range of participants, including varied profiles. This overview does not seek to present findings, but to familiarise the reader with the environments and relationships that shaped the ethnographic inquiry. By outlining the fieldwork's structure and introducing some of the central figures who reappear later, it provides an entry point into these textures.

Fieldwork Scope and Design

This fieldwork was conducted between August 2020 and December 2022, involving intermittent periods of short- and longer-term stays across six farms in England. The sites were selected for their diverse profiles and were located primarily in the North and Northeast of England. This included a workers' cooperative in County Durham, a market garden in East Yorkshire, a family-run smallholding on the outskirts of York, an educational NGO campus in rural northeast England, a commercial-educational hybrid farm in the Pennine hills, and an informal permaculture garden run from a private home near York.

The sites represented a spectrum of farm types, ranging from formally structured, revenue-generating enterprises to more informal, lifestyle-oriented gardens. This diversity offered insight into the varied ways that practices are enacted across different material and social landscapes. I employed a flexible ethnographic approach grounded in participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and immersion in daily routines. In several cases, I returned to the same farms at different points over two years, allowing me to witness seasonal change and build relationships that unfolded over time. These repeat visits were particularly useful in observing how hosting styles, volunteer relationships, and site practices evolved across time and context.

Farm access was initially gained through the WWOOF UK platform, but subsequent placements emerged via referrals from hosts and returning volunteers, reflecting the informal and networked nature of ecological volunteering. Most of the participants I met were WWOOFers recruited through the platform, though others were involved through more localized or community-based volunteering arrangements. This reflects what I describe throughout the thesis as a mixed economy of volunteering, in which formal WWOOF systems coexist with overlapping modes of care and exchange.

To make sense of the structural diversity and relational dynamics encountered across these farms, I propose a spectrum-based framework that maps the sites along two key axes. This is not intended as a rigid typology, but as a heuristic device to highlight the overlapping modes through which ecological volunteering is organized, experienced, and sustained. The horizontal axis captures a continuum between more formally structured, revenue-generating enterprises, such as market gardens or educational farms with commercial output and established routines, and more informal, lifestyle-oriented or community-rooted spaces, where volunteering is embedded within domestic rhythms, personal commitments, or alternative social visions. The vertical axis reflects varying degrees of intentionality and structure in daily interaction: at one end are sites with fixed schedules, pedagogical goals, or outcome-driven organisation; at the other, spaces where engagement unfolds more fluidly through care, hospitality, improvisation, or co-presence.

This framework reveals the material differences between sites, as well as the diverse ethical, pedagogical, and ecological commitments that underpin them. Some farms positioned themselves as learning spaces structured around output and knowledge transfer; others foregrounded specific priorities. Still others moved across the axes depending on ongoing flux. In this sense, the spectrum foregrounds what might be called a politics of design in ecological volunteering: where hosting becomes an act of world-making, shaped by intersecting values, relational intentions, and practical constraints.

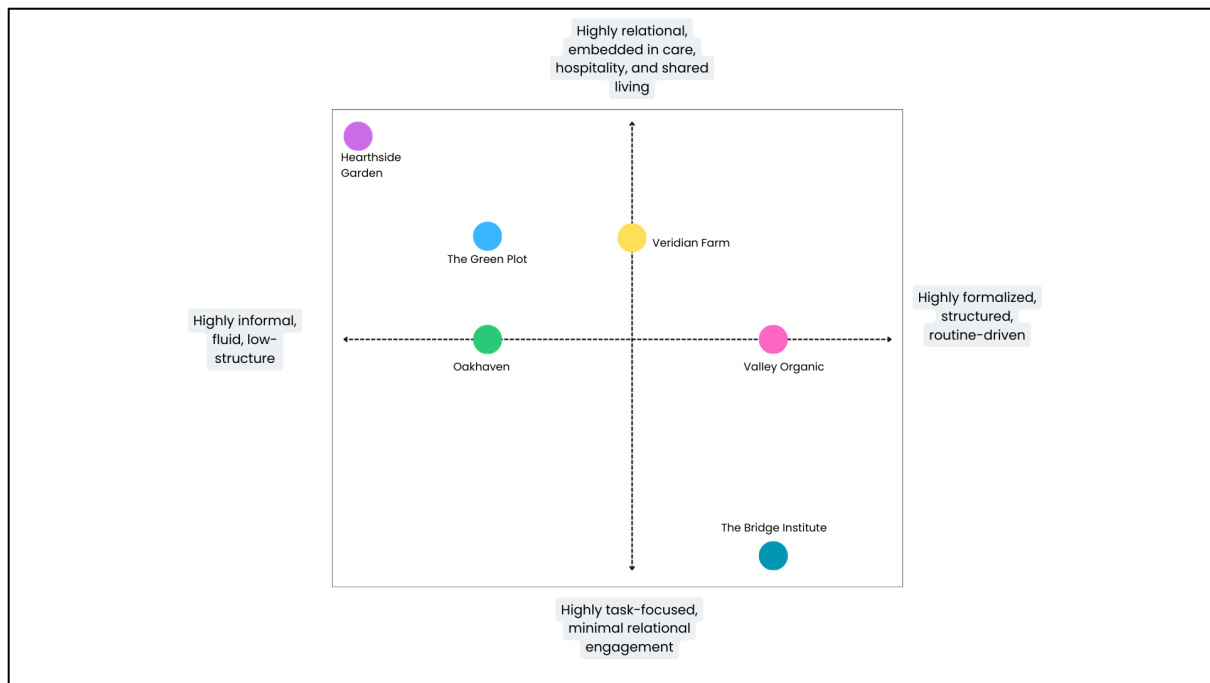


Figure 5: Spectrum of Ecological Volunteering Sites Across Axes of Structure and Relationality

Notably, one of the sites, Veridian Farm, had formally stepped back from hosting WWOOFers shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, yet continued to welcome volunteers through long-standing relationships and informal community channels. Although it was no longer listed on the WWOOF platform at the time of my fieldwork, I include it here due to its previous engagement with the network and its continuing relevance to the ethos and themes explored in this study. Veridian Farm's position on the spectrum was itself fluid: while it featured organisational elements such as permaculture teaching and veg box production, much of the learning unfolded through participation. Its shifting position serves as a reminder that these sites are not fixed points on a grid, but living systems that adapt to context, capacity, and community over time. In the section that follows, I offer fieldwork sketches of each site. These narratives are not comprehensive case studies, but brief introductions to the layered textures that shaped everyday life in each place. They are presented in no particular order of importance but are framed to reflect the diversity and relational specificity that characterised this fieldwork.

Sites and People: Fieldwork Sketches

Veridian Farm (County Durham)

Veridian Farm is a permaculture-based workers' cooperative located just outside Durham. Although no longer formally listed as a WWOOF UK host at the time of fieldwork, the farm continued to welcome volunteers through long-standing relationships and local networks. It operates a veg box scheme supplying organic produce to surrounding communities and offers workshops in nonviolent communication, herbalism, and craft-based skills. The site is co-managed by Daniel and Beatrice, both founding members of the co-op. Daniel is a long-time permaculture teacher and community organiser, while Beatrice has deep roots in ecological education and volunteer coordination. Sophie, the garden manager, began as a WWOOFer and gradually took on increasing responsibilities, including managing the volunteer days. Isabel, a long-term volunteer originally from Guatemala, was a consistent presence during my visits. Rachel, a local volunteer, often returned to support in the garden while also managing her own allotment nearby. Nina, another volunteer, exemplified a different kind of mobility: using her time at the farm as part of a broader economic strategy, renting out her camper van through digital platforms while volunteering on site.



Figure 6: Volunteers Working in The Pumpkin Patch at Veridian Farm

The Green Plot (East Yorkshire)

The Green Plot is a certified organic market garden run by Grace, a solo host and former soil scientist. The site specializes in mixed salad leaves, herbs, and seasonal vegetables grown in polytunnels and outdoor beds, supplying a local veg box scheme and participating in community food sales. Grace combines scientific precision with hands-on ecological methods, including extensive composting systems and nutrient recycling techniques. She has hosted WWOOFers since the 1980s and prefers those interested in learning by doing. Phil, a volunteer who arrived during the pandemic and remained for two years, became closely involved in both daily tasks and infrastructural maintenance. The setting is quiet; while daily work follows established routines largely directed by Grace, these are often adapted flexibly according to changing conditions, creating a focused yet responsive environment rather than a rigidly formalized one. Opportunities for shared mealtimes and Grace's characteristic low-pressure knowledge exchange during daily tasks form the primary basis for interpersonal connection,

which, for some volunteers like Phil who stayed for an extended period, evidently fostered a strong relational dynamic alongside the farm work.



Figure 7: Plant stall and signage at The Green Plot, promoting organic vegetables, fruits, and herbs

Oakhaven (York)

Located on the suburban edge of York, Oakhaven is a family-run smallholding managed by Arthur and Julie. It includes a one-acre garden, two allotments, and a seven-acre field with a mixed orchard and woodland. The site produces a wide range of vegetables and fruits using traditional organic methods. Arthur and Julie have been WWOOF hosts since the early 1990s and are active in local growing initiatives. They take a practical, education-focused approach to hosting, favouring volunteers who are interested in learning about gardening and self-sufficiency. Their home and garden offer a domestic, seasonal rhythm shaped by composting,

hand-digging, and structured tasks. Though no volunteers were interviewed at this site during my fieldwork, Arthur and Julie shared reflections on past WWOOFers and their approach to volunteer engagement.



Figure 8: Vegetable Beds in a Part of the One-Acre Organic Garden at Oakhaven

The Bridge Institute (Northeast England)

The Bridge Institute is a residential NGO campus situated in rural northeast England, run by a team of coordinators with Clara as my main point of contact. It hosts students and volunteers (such as Yuki, a Japanese climate activist; Louis; and Mia, an experienced Italian volunteer) from around the world. The site has a distinctly structured feel, particularly during designated work periods. WWOOFers contribute to campus duties, where tasks are often demanding and follow clear directives, emphasizing efficiency and contribution to the campus's operational needs. This structured approach to work reflects an institutional learning environment. Outside of these work engagements, however, the campus offers a more communal atmosphere, with

WWOOFers living alongside students / volunteers and having opportunities to participate in shared meals and evening events, allowing for informal social interaction.



Figure 9: Volunteers and students gathered for a presentation at The Bridge Institute

Valley Organic (Todmorden)

Valley Organic is a social enterprise farm located in the hills near Todmorden, West Yorkshire. It grew out of the broader Incredible Edible movement and combines educational outreach with small-scale, commercial permaculture-based food production. Activities include maintaining farm infrastructure, as well as supporting youth training and local sustainability programmes. The site is managed by a small host team, including Matt and Morgan. Volunteers work on practical farm tasks and sometimes contribute to building or infrastructure projects. Declan, a volunteer from Leeds, stayed long-term and supported both practical work and peer learning. David, who had previous WWOOFing experience elsewhere but was volunteering locally at Valley Organic, and Garry, a local volunteer, contributed regularly to farmwork. Tracie, whom I met in Todmorden, was a long-time WWOOFer with decades of experience from other farms, as part of her ongoing volunteering cycle across the UK.



Figure 10: Polytunnel Growing Space at Valley Organic

Hearthside Garden (North Yorkshire)

Hearthside Garden is a small-scale permaculture garden run by Marie in a village near York. The site includes a greenhouse, orchard, soft fruits, and raised beds, with activities ranging from seasonal planting to food preservation. Marie lives on-site and hosts WWOOFers in her home, offering a calm and highly personalized volunteering experience. While I did not conduct formal interviews with volunteers at this site, feedback from previous WWOOFers and her own profile describe the setting as welcoming and educational. Her enthusiasm for sharing her practical knowledge of organic gardening, permaculture, and food preservation shapes her informal teaching style, and her strawbale house extension serves as a focal point for discussions on green building and low-impact living.



Figure 11: A Cross-Section of the Strawbale Wall at Hearthside Garden, Part of the House Extension That Marie Built Herself

Meanings and Positionality

Across the six sites, the meanings volunteers attached to their participation were diverse, dynamic, and often shaped by more than one set of expectations or desires. For some, volunteering offered a practical route to engage with sustainable practices. Others approached the experience as a period of recalibration or reflection during times of life transition. There were also those who entered farm spaces with few fixed intentions at all, and whose sense of purpose evolved over time, through immersion in routines. In this sense, participation was rarely reducible to a single motivation. It involved ongoing meaning-making, formed through action, relationship, and the unfolding contingencies of everyday life on the farm.

Factors such as volunteers' nationality, class, age, mobility, and life stage significantly influenced both their experiences and how they interpreted them. Some, like Tracie, had spent decades WWOOFing across different farms, building trust with particular hosts and valuing the simplicity and regularity of returning to familiar places. Others, like Yuki and Mia, engaged WWOOF as part of a broader search for alternative ways of living and being, often in response to strain. For Yuki, this was the disruption of her climate activism plans due to the pandemic,

while for Mia, it was the physical and emotional toll of the lockdown in her native Italy. Nina, in contrast, folded her WWOOF placements into a pragmatic survival strategy that included camper van rental and online freelancing, blending modalities that challenge conventional ideas of volunteering altogether. This thesis does not seek singular explanations for WWOOF participation. Rather, it follows on how meanings emerge through the everyday tasks of farm life such as composting, weeding, cooking, talking, sharing breaks, or just spending time alongside others. It is in these encounters that volunteers are seen to navigate the core concerns of this study: how relations are negotiated, often in ways that are situated rather than fixed or predictable. By foregrounding this ethnographic complexity, the chapters that follow seek to trace how different people inhabit ecological volunteering not just as form of labour exchange, but as a dynamic field of interplays that unfold over time. This chapter has sought to establish the rich and varied terrain of the WWOOF network. From its historical evolution and decentralised organisational structures to the diverse spectrum of its dimensions, the aim has been to provide a comprehensive contextual grounding. Having established this multifaceted landscape of practice: the 'who, what, where, and when' of WWOOFing as encountered in this research, the thesis must now turn to the conceptual tools required to interpret these empirical realities. The following chapter, therefore, delves into a critical review of existing literature, beginning with an exploration of the core conceptual framings through which WWOOF has been, and can be, understood.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Evans-Pritchard once described social anthropology as “a kind of historiography, and therefore ultimately of philosophy or art ... interested in design rather than in process, and that it therefore seeks patterns and not scientific laws, and interprets rather than explains”

(Kuper, 1996, p. 124).

Situating WWOOF: A Review of Core Conceptual Framings

Framing WWOOF as a Mixed Economy of Volunteering

WWOOF is often described as a global network for ecological volunteering, framed in promotional discourse as an opportunity for enrichment in sustainable agriculture. Yet as my fieldwork unfolded, it became increasingly clear that WWOOF does not operate as a single, coherent system. Instead, it exists as part of what economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham (2005) termed a “diverse economy,” which in this research is conceptualized as a “mixed economy.” This economic field encompasses formal transactions and institutions, as well as non-market forms of exchange that defy clear boundaries between labour, care, and reciprocity. Their influential work challenges the idea of ‘capitalocentrism’, which assumes capitalism is the only legitimate economic system. Their research highlights a diverse range of other essential economic activities, including reciprocal labour, cooperative exchange, and household or volunteer work. For context, Gibson-Graham (2005) developed this framework through postdevelopment-oriented action research, particularly through their engagement with communities like the Jagna Municipality in the Philippines, a rural economy reliant on subsistence agriculture and remittances. By documenting existing non-market activities such as reciprocal labour exchange, cooperative farming, and local barter systems, they argued for strengthening these “community economies” as viable alternatives to externally imposed, export-oriented development models. This lens is particularly useful for understanding WWOOF, which operates precisely at the intersection of these diverse economic practices, where value is generated and exchanged in ways that are not always reducible to market logics.

WWOOF operates through an international organisational infrastructure, but this thesis is analytically grounded in ethnographic research conducted at UK-based WWOOF host sites. The literature reviewed here serves to situate and contextualise these UK experiences and does

not treat WWOOF as a globally uniform phenomenon. While WWOOF presents itself as a structured platform for connecting hosts and volunteers, in practice, it overlaps with a range of other systems. Some farms operate almost entirely through WWOOF, recruiting international travellers via the platform for seasonal help. Others, such as Veridian Farm, have stepped away from formal listings but continue to host through informal relationships, local volunteers, or personal networks. Across sites, I encountered self-described WWOOFers as well as volunteers whose engagement aligned strongly with the principles and goals of local food activism, freelance work, or independent agroecological learning. Their presence reflects a much broader ecosystem of participation, where WWOOF is not an endpoint but a node within an interwoven set of alternative economies. Within this mixed economy, volunteers bring with them different levels of dependence and flexibility. Some arrive as travellers on a gap year or post-university break; others like Nina blend WWOOFing with other income-generating strategies, including camper van rentals or online freelancing. Tracie, by contrast, represents the long-term, cyclical WWOOFer returning to the same farms year after year, building trust and routine, while actively resisting mainstream economic pressures. Hosts, too, vary in how they relate to the economic and ethical contours of WWOOF: some see it as a reciprocal arrangement built on shared values; others rely more heavily on volunteer labour due to the precarity of small-scale organic farming, even as they hesitate to frame the relationship in terms of need. This unevenness raises important questions about labour, value, and recognition. The WWOOF model ostensibly rejects commodification by excluding money from the exchange, yet in many cases the work volunteers perform is necessary to the functioning of the farm. The absence of wages does not mean the absence of value, and the line between hospitality and labour can become blurred especially when expectations go unspoken or when volunteers take on central roles. The idea of “volunteering” thus obscures a range of economic relationships that are both materially consequential and ethically charged. For farms with minimal resources, unpaid

labour may be a lifeline; for some volunteers, it may function as informal training, temporary housing, or simply a form of embodied learning. But these arrangements are not neutral as they are shaped by asymmetries of power, access, and interpretation.

By framing WWOOF as part of a mixed economy of volunteering, I aim to complicate idealized narratives of exchange. Rather than viewing WWOOF as either exploitation or empowerment, this thesis explores how it functions as a space of negotiation, where people navigate the tensions between values and needs, structure and improvisation, gift and labour. To understand this negotiated space further, it is first necessary to situate WWOOF in relation to another significant, and often critiqued, domain of ethical travel: voluntourism.

Situating WWOOF in the Voluntourism Landscape

Voluntourism, emerging prominently in the 1990s, sought to merge travel with service, presenting itself as an ethical alternative to traditional tourism. Defined by Wearing (2001) as organized travel involving diverse initiatives, voluntourism gained traction among travellers seeking meaningful engagement with local communities. Programs such as Earthwatch pioneered these efforts, connecting participants with conservation projects while emphasizing education. However, critiques by scholars like Boluk et al. (2017) highlight the sector's increasing commodification, with many programs prioritizing tourist satisfaction over genuine contributions to host communities. This often perpetuates post-colonial power dynamics, where volunteers from economically developed regions assist communities in less-developed areas, reinforcing hierarchical dependencies rather than fostering equitable relationships.

In this landscape, WWOOF distinguishes itself as a compelling alternative to commercialized voluntourism. WWOOF aligns with the foundational principles of voluntourism by blending travel and service. However, its focus on reciprocal, non-commercial exchanges sets it apart. Unlike fee-based programs that emphasise tourist experience, WWOOF creates partnerships

between hosts and volunteers based on mutual respect and shared ecological values. As Wengel et al. (2018) observe, drawing on research on WWOOF in Nepal, WWOOF's organisational structure also supports relationships grounded in collaboration and negotiated exchange. Their analysis shows that expectations around work, learning, and participation emerge through ongoing interaction between hosts and volunteers, taking shape over the course of everyday engagement. This mode of engagement addresses concerns commonly raised in critiques of voluntourism, where roles and obligations are often predefined and unevenly distributed.

The origins of WWOOF in the "back to the land" ethos of the 1970s reflect its distinct ethical framework. Coppard's vision aimed to support organic farmers while also creating opportunities for urban dwellers to reconnect with rural life and sustainable practices. Initially designed as "Working Weekends on Organic Farms," the program's early focus was on bridging urban and rural divides through practical, hands-on learning. Over time, however, WWOOF evolved beyond its initial scope. As Wengel et al. (2018) note, WWOOF shifted from labour support to prioritizing cultural and educational exchange, emphasizing the mutual enrichment of both hosts and volunteers. This shift reflects the network's commitment to ensuring that participants are active contributors to ecological knowledge-sharing rather than merely fulfilling labour demands.

WWOOF's emphasis on non-monetary exchanges and reciprocal co-learning contrasts sharply with the commercialized voluntourism models critiqued by Terry (2014). While many programs charge significant fees for participation, WWOOF maintains its non-commercial ethos, focusing instead on exchanges where volunteers offer labour in return for meals, accommodation, and ecological education. This model reduces the risks of exploitation by aligning the goals of hosts and volunteers, fostering relationships built on trust, equality, and shared purpose. Additionally, WWOOF's emphasis on sustainability, both in practice and

philosophy, addresses broader ethical concerns within voluntourism. Boluk et al. (2017) critique traditional models for perpetuating dependency without addressing systemic issues, whereas WWOOF fosters a practical, hands-on approach to sustainable agriculture, encouraging participants to engage in practices that extend beyond the immediate farm setting. Wengel (2018) further emphasise how this practical engagement fosters an intimate understanding of sustainability, allowing participants to carry these principles into other aspects of their lives.

Beyond its structural differences, WWOOF also challenges dominant narratives within voluntourism by positioning itself as a platform for fostering ecological citizenship. Participants engage with the ethical complexities of balancing human needs with environmental constraints, learning to navigate the intertwined challenges of sustainability and care. By centering education, cultural exchange, and shared values, WWOOF transforms voluntourism into a tool for building both ecological awareness and social solidarity. Its structure bridges divides between urban and rural, local and global, creating a network that supports resilience at multiple levels.

Despite its strengths, WWOOF faces persistent tensions, particularly in managing expectations between hosts and volunteers. As Wengel (2018) document, some participants engage with WWOOF primarily as a form of low-cost travel, while some hosts may frame their needs more in terms of labour than mutual learning. These mismatches echo broader critiques of voluntourism, including the risk that participants, despite the language of exchange, become part of unpaid and unacknowledged labour systems that are crucial to the operation of under-resourced farms. While WWOOF's structure promotes ideals of transparency and reciprocity, these values are not always realized in practice. Several volunteers I spoke with described experiences of friction. These contradictions do not undermine the potential of WWOOF, but

they do demand closer attention. The rhetoric of sustainability and cultural exchange can obscure the everyday tensions of volunteer-based agriculture: the ambiguity of roles, the power asymmetries between hosts and WWOOFers, and the labour that underpins it. Rather than positioning WWOOF as an alternative to voluntourism, it may be more accurate to see it as a hybrid form, one that shares voluntourism's aspirations and dilemmas in equal measure. Another crucial lens through which WWOOF has been understood is that of a social movement, a framing that requires a detailed look at the broader historical and political currents from which this interpretation emerged. The following discussion reviews how WWOOF has been interpreted through social movement frameworks in the literature, with attention to how these interpretations illuminate, rather than define the UK-based practices examined in this thesis.

The Social Movement Frame: Context and Application

As noted in scholarly accounts, one of the most prominent ways WWOOF has been framed is as part of a larger social movement resisting neoliberal agricultural norms and advocating for localized, sustainable food systems (Mostafanezhad, 2016). This reading finds deeper resonance when WWOOF is situated within the late 20th and early 21st-century socio-political currents that fundamentally challenged global agribusiness and championed food sovereignty. For example, the late 1990s witnessed iconic protests like those led by French farmer José Bové and the Confédération Paysanne. Bové's dismantling of a McDonald's in Millau in 1999 became a potent symbol against "la malbouffe américaine" and trade injustices threatening local farmers, with Bové declaring McDonald's a "symbol of standardized food and the progressive elimination of small farmers" (Daley, 1999). This resistance extended to direct actions against genetically modified crops, linking food quality to a broader critique of agribusiness technology. These actions fed into a wider anti-globalization movement, dramatically highlighted by the 1999 WTO "Battle of Seattle" protests. Anthropologist David

Graeber, a participant, described Seattle as the North American “birth of a new movement” where a global counter-movement to neoliberalism, with roots in struggles from Chiapas to Paris, made its presence known (Graeber, 2002). In Seattle, marchers decried the “McGlobalization” of agriculture driven by WTO policies that favoured multinational agri-food conglomerates pushing hormone-treated beef and genetically engineered crops, thereby politicizing food systems as a central battleground.

This critique of industrial agriculture was further articulated by scholars like Tim Lang, whose work *Food Wars* conceptualized contemporary food policy as a contest between the dominant, crisis-ridden productivist model and emerging alternative paradigms like organic and local food systems. Lang and Heasman (2004) argued for a “new era of experimentation” challenging the status quo. The systemic vulnerabilities of the global food system were starkly revealed by the 2006-2008 food price spikes and the financial credit crunch, which “cemented doubts about the intellectual rigidities of the Washington Consensus” and its faith in market-led food policies (Lang, 2009). In this context, WWOOF can be seen as a grassroots manifestation of a counter narrative, connecting volunteers directly to organic producers and bypassing conventional market relations. Mostafanezhad (2016), for instance, notes that WWOOF host farms often explicitly align with “protective counter-movements” by embracing organic farming and eco-spirituality as forms of resistance, though this exists in “constant tension with the neoliberal agrarian and tourism marketplace”.

Further shaping this landscape in the mid-2000s was growing ecological awareness, significantly spurred by the UK’s Stern Review (2006) on climate change, which reframed global warming as an urgent economic and moral issue, and concerns about “peak oil”. These anxieties fueled the rise of the Transition Town movement, launched by Rob Hopkins, which advocated for community resilience through grassroots actions like community gardens, local currencies, and reskilling workshops, often drawing heavily on permaculture design principles.

The Transition ethos, which Campbell (2019) describes as a form of practical resilience and a symbolic challenge to the dominant agribusiness model, finds a clear parallel in the WWOOF network. WWOOF's emphasis on hands-on practice (*praxis*) for building local food security and low-impact lifestyles shows this intersection. In this light, WWOOF can be seen as an active participant in nurturing the kinds of ecological citizenship and collective efforts against industrial agriculture that Campbell outlines.

Recent critiques, however, have challenged this more overtly political reading. Emerging research points to the diverse, localized motivations of WWOOF participants, many of whom are drawn to the network for pragmatic or personal reasons rather than overt activism. Some are seeking new skills in organic farming, others pursue cultural immersion, while yet others value the opportunity for inexpensive travel. Such findings suggest that WWOOF might be less of a cohesive social movement and more a dynamic, practice-oriented network shaped by multiple motivations and contexts.

Thus, this exploration of WWOOF scholarship and its associated socio-political contexts reveals a strong tendency to frame the network in activist terms. However, while understanding this historical backdrop is vital, an exclusive reliance on a social movement lens presents significant limitations, necessitating a critical turn towards practice and relationality.

Understanding Through Multiple Lenses

If WWOOF is neither a cohesive social movement, because that frame risks flattening its diversity, nor a straightforwardly ethical alternative to voluntourism, because it is fraught with its own internal tensions, then how are we to approach it? My contention in this thesis is that any useful analysis must first confront the risk of what I term 'ideological flattening': a tendency to read all WWOOF participation primarily through the lens of collective resistance or uniform political intentionality. This approach, as the literature itself suggests, can

inadvertently collapse the diverse, often personal, and sometimes contradictory motivations that animate the network. Qualitative research consistently shows that many WWOOFers are motivated by experiential, therapeutic, and personal forms of engagement, including skill acquisition, embodied learning, and temporary withdrawal from conventional routines (Wengel et al., 2018; Miller & Mair, 2015). Yamamoto & Engelsted (2014) study of WWOOF host farms in the United States similarly highlights that volunteers are commonly oriented toward learning and experience, rather than explicit political or activist goals. At the same time, hosts' motivations can also range from diverse incentives, often distinct from, or existing alongside, any overt political ideology.

The danger of ideological flattening, therefore, lies in its potential to obscure this rich heterogeneity and impose a coherence that the lived experiences within the network frequently contest. My ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates this diversity. WWOOF relationships are shaped by shared values, where they exist. However, they are also profoundly influenced by asymmetries in knowledge, power, and expectation, where friction begins to emerge. What might appear as straightforward solidarity from one angle can register as obligation, friction, or a carefully negotiated compromise from another. Consequently, framing WWOOF as a monolithic social movement often overlooks these vital lived complexities. In many instances, what sustains the network and gives it meaning for participants is not a unified critique of capitalism, but rather the cumulative force of countless small acts of mutual adjustment, care, and embodied collaboration encountered in daily farm life.

This recognition necessitates a shift in analytical focus. Rather than primarily categorising WWOOF through its ideological origins or its potential as an activist force, it becomes more ethnographically productive to understand it as a relational, practice-based network. From this perspective, WWOOF operates less through formal scripts or declared political programmes,

and more through emergent, negotiated interactions. Its daily rhythms and the experiences it generates are profoundly shaped by material and affective contexts: weather, seasonality, the affordances of specific landscapes, the physical engagement of bodies, and the material culture of tools and infrastructure. Theoretical lenses drawn from studies of moral economy, informal labour, and ethics of care may better capture these nuanced dynamics than social movement theory alone. Furthermore, Gibson-Graham's (2005) notion of "economic difference" is useful here, signalling the importance of recognising WWOOF as participating in a plural economic landscape: one where value is generated and surplus potentially redistributed not solely for profit, but for relational and ecological flourishing. This theme of WWOOF's embeddedness in diverse, often non-capitalist, forms of exchange will be more fully developed in the subsequent discussion on volunteering, reciprocity, and alternative economies.

By tracing WWOOF's ideological lineage through its association with various activist currents and by critically assessing the interpretive frames often applied to it, this section has sought to demonstrate how the network's perceived meanings have been historically shaped. Yet, it has also highlighted the limitations of viewing WWOOF primarily through such ideological lenses. The following sections of this literature review will continue to build upon this critique by engaging with specific theoretical domains such as reciprocity, situated learning, care, and resilience, that help illuminate WWOOF's character as a dynamic field of practice.

Reciprocity & Alternative Economies

Volunteer-based exchanges sit at the heart of WWOOF, but they resist easy categorisation. Unlike formal employment or charitable work, WWOOF volunteering blends labour, learning, lifestyle experimentation, and ethical engagement. These experiences are shaped by both the aspirations of hosts and volunteers and by the social and moral frameworks in which these exchanges are embedded. To understand WWOOF as more than just a logistical arrangement,

it's essential to theorise exchange as a relational and value-laden process. The anthropological foundation laid by Marcel Mauss, particularly in *The Gift* (1954/2002), highlights how acts of giving create obligations that bind people into enduring relationships. Mauss conceptualised gift exchange not as altruism, but as a moral economy: a system of reciprocity that forges belonging and sustains social cohesion. In the context of WWOOF, where formal contracts are absent and expectations must be negotiated in situ, this perspective reveals how even simple acts of hospitality or work-sharing are embedded in broader cultural ethics.

Sahlins's (1972/2004) typology of reciprocity expands this analysis by distinguishing between generalized, balanced, and negative forms. Generalised reciprocity, which refers to open-ended giving without immediate expectation of return, maps onto many WWOOF experiences where hosts offer hospitality and volunteers contribute enthusiasm and labour. Balanced reciprocity surfaces in more structured arrangements, such as agreed work hours or skill-based exchanges. At the other end of the spectrum is negative reciprocity, which Sahlins (1972/2004) defines as the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, such as through overt exploitation or deception. While such extreme cases can occur, many frictions in WWOOF are more nuanced. This often emerges from the power asymmetries within the exchange itself. As Terry (2014) suggests, for example, hosts often position themselves as educators or mentors, which can reinforce these asymmetries even in ostensibly egalitarian contexts. Sahlins's model thus helps to surface the implicit norms and expectations shaping volunteer encounters, revealing that reciprocity in WWOOF is neither uniform nor ideologically pure, but a site of continuous negotiation.

This understanding of reciprocity as a relational process rather than a static template is reinforced by more recent scholarship. Deville et al. (2016) argue that reciprocal engagement in WWOOF depends on how both parties co-construct meaning through ongoing interaction.

Similarly, Cronauer (2012), based on interviews with WWOOF hosts and guests in New Zealand, observes that WWOOF has evolved beyond its original organic farming ethos to become a social exchange network, where motivations and outcomes vary widely. These studies caution against assuming a singular moral framework and emphasize how reciprocity is embedded in varied realities. What appears reciprocal in one setting may feel extractive in another, depending on the actors' expectations, power dynamics, and institutional norms.

Such complexities have also been examined through critical research on voluntourism and informal labour. Sin (2010), for instance, critiques the assumption that volunteering automatically leads to ethical or transformative outcomes. Her study of Singaporean youth participating in overseas volunteer programmes highlights how power and positionality shape learning experiences, and how good intentions can mask paternalistic or neo-colonial logics. Participation, in her view, is not synonymous with reflexivity. Volunteers may fail to question their role in reproducing inequality or may approach volunteering as a form of personal development rather than mutual engagement. These concerns resonate with Mowforth and Munt's (2008) analysis of voluntourism as a form of moral holiday, where Global North travellers seek meaningful experiences in the Global South without disrupting broader structures of privilege. Although WWOOF diverges from commercial voluntourism in important ways especially in its grassroots orientation and avoidance of financial fees, it is not immune to similar dynamics. The desire for authenticity or ethical consumption can sometimes obscure the unequal conditions under which informal, unpaid labour is mobilized.

This tension is especially apparent in the literature on informal economies and care work. Studies of informal civic and volunteer groups show they often rely on significant emotional labour and continuous interpersonal negotiation, frequently operating without extensive formal recognition or support (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Furthermore, ethnographic research in

diverse volunteer settings, such as that by Chadwick et al. (2021), highlights how such contexts can profoundly blur the boundaries between altruism and obligation, or care and implicit coercion, particularly where livelihoods and social recognition are at stake. In WWOOF, the absence of contracts or oversight does not neutralize power; instead, it redistributes power into social subtleties. For example, volunteers may overwork to “earn their keep” or avoid conflict, while hosts may silently shoulder the emotional burden of managing interpersonal tensions. These dynamics reveal how informal economies are not outside capitalism, but entangled with it, shaped by precarity, gendered expectations, and the moral weight of sustainability itself.

To navigate this complexity, I propose a conceptual typology of reciprocity within WWOOF, developed through theoretical reflection and informed by ethnographic engagement. This typology is not a finding, but a lens to think with, rather than simply extract from, the field. The first mode, mutual benefit, corresponds to the aspirational ideal where both parties gain meaningfully from the exchange. Volunteers learn new skills, connect with nature, and experience cultural immersion, while hosts receive valuable support. However, such balance is not always realized. The second mode, unbalanced reciprocity, captures moments when power asymmetries, mismatched expectations, or unclear roles create tension. Volunteers may feel taken for granted; hosts may feel unsupported. These frictions, though not always malicious, reveal the fragility of trust in informal systems. The third mode, complex reciprocity, broadens the frame further, recognising that exchange in WWOOF often intersects with changing realities. In such instances, reciprocity is not broken, but it is negotiated anew, contingent on circumstance and care.

Framing WWOOF through this triadic lens helps us move beyond idealized portrayals. It makes visible the plural economies at play: not just labour for lodging, but exchanges of time, attention, knowledge, and emotional investment. Here, Gibson-Graham’s (2005) concept of

“surplus possibilities” becomes useful. Rather than measuring value through efficiency or market return, surplus in WWOOF manifests in goodwill. These are forms of wealth not easily captured by formal metrics, but essential to the network’s sustainability. Within this diverse economy, WWOOF operates through a shared ethos, neither fully inside nor outside capitalism, but alongside and beyond it.

This reframing invites us to see WWOOF not as an alternative in opposition to dominant economic models, but as a hybrid space where value circulates differently. It is precisely this hybridity: the coexistence of care and labour, ideology and pragmatism that makes WWOOF both resilient and complex. As we move into the next section, we will shift focus from exchange to learning, asking how these reciprocal and moral economies are circulated through embodied practice and situated knowledge.

Situated Learning, Belonging & Communities of Practice

Understanding WWOOF as a site of exchange and reciprocity also requires attention to how participants come to absorb the values and practices associated with ecological care. Much of this learning does not occur through formal instruction but through practical immersion, which is through doing. Theories of situated learning provide a crucial lens for understanding this process. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, in their seminal work *Situated Learning* (1991), propose a radical rethinking of learning, moving away from the idea of it being simply the “reception of factual knowledge or information”. Instead, they argue that learning is a social process, an “integral and inseparable aspect of social practice”, where agent, activity, and the world are seen as “mutually constitutive”. Their concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is central here. LPP describes how newcomers become members of a Community of Practice (CoP) not through abstract training in decontextualized knowledge, but through gradual and increasing involvement in the actual practices of that community. Initial

participation is “peripheral” yet “legitimate,” meaning newcomers are recognized as potential members and are given access to observe and perform tasks that are part of the community’s work, moving towards fuller participation and, crucially, towards becoming full members of that community. Applied to WWOOF, this suggests that volunteers do not simply acquire disembodied knowledge about organic farming; they are socialized into the farm’s culture through embodied participation and everyday interactions, gradually transforming their identity and understanding through their engagement.

The idea that knowledge is co-produced through practice rather than simply transferred from expert to novice resonates deeply with many ethnographic accounts of WWOOFing. Tasks such as composting, planting, food preservation, or animal care are embedded in social processes of observation, imitation, correction, and collaborative problem-solving. This aligns with Lave and Wenger’s emphasis on learning as integrated into the “production of practice” within a CoP. Hosts and experienced volunteers often scaffold newcomers’ involvement, allowing them to first engage with tasks that are genuinely part of the farm’s functioning, even if peripheral, before taking on more responsibility and complexity. For instance, Wengel (2018), in their qualitative study exploring host-guest relations and ethical accountability on WWOOF farms in New Zealand, emphasise that for many WWOOFers, learning was primarily ‘unstructured and informal,’ occurring through ‘participant observation and ‘doing’ alongside hosts’ rather than formal instruction. Their research, which used ‘dirt’ as a metaphor to explore the embodied and often messy realities of farm work, highlights how this direct, hand-on engagement is where knowledge transfer often becomes most deeply embedded. In this way, WWOOF farms can be seen as operating as sites of informal apprenticeship, where ecological knowledge is acquired alongside moral virtues. Learning within such a community of practice is therefore not simply instrumental or a means to an end, but profoundly affective and relational, shaped by local contexts. This process also involves the formation of identity; as

Lave and Wenger argue, learning through LPP “implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations.”

Tim Ingold’s (2000) theory of dwelling further elaborates the embodied and experiential nature of learning by emphasising how people acquire skills and understanding through their ongoing, active engagement with their environment. For Ingold, skills are not so much acquired as “grown,” incorporated into the human organism “through practice and training in an environment,” making them “as much biological as cultural”. To dwell, in Ingold’s view, is to learn by moving through, responding to, and being shaped by the specific constituents of the landscape. WWOOF volunteers, from this perspective, come to understand the ethics and practices of ecological farming not only through guidance from hosts but through their direct, sensory involvement in a particular place. Soil, weather, seasons, plants, animals, and tools all actively participate in shaping their perception, timing, skills, and attention. This contrasts with approaches that might see the environment as a passive backdrop or knowledge as a set of abstract representations to be imposed upon it. Instead, the dwelling perspective foregrounds a “mutual responsiveness” between humans and their environments: an understanding central to many WWOOF experiences where volunteers learn to “read” the land and adapt their practices accordingly. This engagement with the “taskscape”, the entire ensemble of tasks in their interrelationship within the landscape, is fundamental to how skills and ecological awareness are cultivated.

The significance of this situated and dwelling-based learning encompasses what is learned as well as how learning shapes participants’ sense of belonging. As volunteers integrate themselves into the routines, relationships, and taskscapes of the farm, they often report feelings of connectedness to the broader community of sustainability. This echoes McIntosh and Bonnemann’s (2006) observation that long-term WWOOFers often express a profound

identification with the farm and its values, suggesting that learning is inseparable from processes of emplacement and identity-making. Their exploratory study, based on in-depth interviews with 12 WWOOF hosts and 22 WWOOFers in Canterbury, New Zealand, aimed to understand the distinctive characteristics of the WWOOF farm stay experience. McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006) found that the close cohabitation and shared daily activities inherent in WWOOFing such as learning practical farm skills like milking, fencing, or organic gardening directly from hosts who often treated them like ‘family’ or ‘friends’ were key to WWOOFers developing this sense of identification and deriving ‘personal meaningfulness’ from the experience, distinguishing it from more commercial farm stays. Similarly, Deville et al. (2016), in their study of organic volunteers in Australia, describe how participants come to “feel at home” through repeated bodily engagement with specific tasks and terrains. These processes of integration are not universal, however; they depend on the openness of hosts, the social dynamics of the farm, and the capacity of volunteers to adapt to unfamiliar rhythms and expectations.

Indeed, critical studies of volunteer tourism, such as Sin’s (2010) work exploring the perspectives of local communities and Singaporean youth volunteers in Southeast Asian development contexts, caution that even with good intentions, superficial engagement or a primary focus on volunteers’ personal development over mutual understanding can hinder genuine learning and integration into host communities. Sin’s research, which aimed to critique assumptions about the universally positive impacts of volunteer tourism by foregrounding local voices, reveals that such encounters can sometimes reinforce rather than bridge cultural divides if not approached with reflexivity. For example, Sin (2010) details how local community members in Cambodian orphanages or Southeast Asian villages perceived some volunteer efforts such as the construction of classrooms or toilets undertaken without full consultation on actual needs, or short-term English teaching that didn’t align with local pedagogical realities,

as ‘one-off’ projects. These well-intentioned initiatives were sometimes seen as disconnected from sustained local requirements and failed to foster deep mutual understanding or lasting relationships, thereby hindering genuine community integration or shared learning. In such cases, the potential for volunteers to achieve legitimate peripheral participation within the host community, or for truly shared learning to occur, is significantly diminished. This points to how situated learning and a sense of belonging in cross-cultural exchanges like WWOOF depend not only just on being physically present, but also on being open to reflexive and reciprocal relationships.

Pre-learning, particularly in the digital age, significantly shapes initial expectations and subsequent experiences within WWOOF. Prospective volunteers frequently immerse themselves in online content: blogs, vlogs, forums, and social media, to gather insights into life on organic farms before their arrival. These digitally mediated narratives often construct particular visions of WWOOFing, frequently emphasising aspirational narratives. While such portrayals can be inspirational, they may also present curated or decontextualised perspectives that diverge from the multifaceted and sometimes challenging realities of on-farm engagement. Consequently, volunteers often arrive with a set of preconceived ideas and aspirational ‘scripts’ derived from this online orientation. This form of ‘knowing about’ WWOOF contrasts with the ‘knowing how’ that develops through direct, embodied experience, and with the situated understanding that Lave and Wenger (1991) argue is central to learning within a community of practice. For Lave and Wenger, learning is not the passive reception of information but an active process of co-participation. Therefore, the understandings gleaned from these digital sources, while influential, must inevitably be reworked in practice through the process of legitimate peripheral participation in the actual day-to-day life and work of a specific WWOOF host setting.

The theoretical frameworks of situated learning and dwelling thus offer robust conceptual tools for understanding WWOOF beyond its straightforward role as an exchange platform, revealing its significance as a dynamic and distributed learning environment. Lave and Wenger's (1991) work critically shifts the focus from learning as the internalization of abstract knowledge to learning as a social process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation. This perspective allows an analysis of how WWOOFers, through their engagement in the authentic activities of a farm, progressively deepen their development within that specific community. Complementing this, Ingold's (2000) dwelling perspective emphasises that learning and skill are not acquired externally but are 'grown' through a process of active, perceptual engagement with the environment, where the human organism and its surroundings are mutually constituted. This lens highlights how ecological practices within WWOOF are cycled through direct interaction with the specific taskscape of each farm, involving a continuous dialogue between person and place. The combined value of these perspectives lies in their profound attention to process, embodiment, relationality, and the co-development of skills and identity over time. They move the analytical focus away from static ideologies or predefined outcomes, and towards the processes inherent in WWOOF participation. These theoretical insights will prove crucial in the empirical chapters that follow, particularly in examining how volunteers engage on the farm.

In addition to embodied learning and relational belonging, some aspects of WWOOF participation can also be understood through the lens of symbolic and ritual practice. Drawing on Victor Turner (1969), ritual can be defined as patterned, repetitive actions that structure social meaning and produce a temporary sense of *communitas*, as well as formal ceremony. *Communitas* is a shared, egalitarian space that transcends ordinary roles and hierarchies. In these farm-based volunteer settings, communal meals, daily chores, or harvest celebrations

function as such socially binding acts, reaffirming ecological commitment and reinforcing collective identity.

From Clifford Geertz's (1973) perspective, these actions carry symbolic weight because they are performances through which cultural meanings are made visible and felt. A volunteer weeding a shared bed alongside others, for instance, is engaging in a socially situated attunement. These moments do not always carry overt ideological content, but they instantiate values such as reciprocity, humility, attentiveness through performative practice. By viewing such interactions as symbolic, we can better understand how WWOOF fosters ethical sensibilities and reinforces a sense of being part of something larger than oneself. These rituals of everyday life contribute to the cultivation of ecological and moral imaginaries that are sustained through repetition and embodiment.

Ecological Care, Ethics, and Sustainability

Just as reciprocity situates WWOOF participants within a matrix of social and ethical relations, the concepts of care and sustainability ground them in the relational and ongoing work of tending to both human and more-than-human life. Central to understanding this dynamic is a nuanced engagement with care ethics, particularly as articulated by María Puig de la Bellacasa in her work *Matters of Care* (2017). Puig de la Bellacasa moves beyond viewing care simply as an emotion or a pre-defined moral attitude. Instead, she presents care as ubiquitous yet deeply contested, a multifaceted practice that saturates daily life but whose meanings are contingent until its absence leads to unravelling. She poses critical questions asking whether care is an affection, a moral obligation, work, a burden, or a joy. In doing so, she highlights the inherent ambiguity of care and frames it as a continuous, materially embedded responsibility essential to sustaining both human and more-than-human worlds.

Crucially, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues that care is not inherently virtuous; it can serve to maintain order and even enforce subjection. To navigate this complexity, she draws on the work of feminist thinkers like Donna Haraway, reframing care as a “critically disruptive doing”, an intervention that can unsettle norms (p. 12). This means adopting Haraway’s (2016) call to “stay with the trouble” of messy, real-world complexities rather than reducing it to a feel-good ethic. This approach is further developed through the notion of “thinking-with,” a concept informed by Haraway’s insight that “beings do not pre-exist their relatings.” For Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), “thinking-with” means refusing intellectual purity and embracing the ongoing, often non-innocent, interdependencies that shape our world (p. 79). This perspective challenges us to see care not just as something humans do to a passive world, but as a co-constitutive process where all entities involved are shaping one another.

A vital dimension of Puig de la Bellacasa's project is the extension of care to “more-than-human worlds,” a concept she prefers over “nonhuman” to emphasise inclusion and entanglement. Her exploration of “Soil Times” in Chapter 5 of *Matters of Care* provides a compelling example. Here, she contrasts the linear, urgent, and productionist temporalities of technoscience with the slow, cyclical, and embedded timescapes of soil care. Soil, often framed as a mere resource for human exploitation, is re-envisioned as a living, relational terrain: a multispecies community where care unfolds between human and more-than-human agencies. Practices such as permaculture’s “Thoughtful and Protracted Observation” (TAPO) or the affective engagement with soil fostered by DIY soil science (like the methods of Ingham (2002)) illustrate how “care time” emerges, a temporal ethic that requires “making time” for soil-specific rhythms and interdependencies (p. 195). This is not a nostalgic return to pre-modern practices but an “untimely innovation” that disrupts dominant notions of progress by valuing maintenance, repair, and the “involutionary momentum” of thickened interdependencies over linear extraction. By focusing on the “mundane doings of maintenance” in soil care, Puig de la

Bellacasa (2017) shows how ecological ethics are materially enacted and how alternative, more livable relationalities might be cultivated (pp. 200-203).

These conceptualisations of care, as a critically disruptive doing, a mode of “thinking-with,” and an engagement with more-than-human temporalities offer a rich framework for analysing WWOOF experiences. Rather than viewing care within WWOOF as simply altruistic help or an emotional bond, Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) work allows us to see it as a situated practice. The daily tasks on WWOOF farms: weeding, composting, animal tending, seed saving, become sites where care is lived. Her emphasis on care as a form of knowledge production also resonates with how WWOOFers learn and transmit ecological understanding through embodied participation and shared practice, as well as through digital storytelling. Furthermore, the inherent challenges in care practice, which Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) highlights, provide a crucial lens for examining the complexities of host-volunteer relationships, the challenges of unpaid ecological labour, and the varying interpretations of sustainability within the WWOOF network. This theoretical approach moves beyond simplistic assessments, allowing for an exploration of how care within WWOOF is continuously reshaped and speculatively re-imagined in practice.

Through immersive practices, individuals often undergo shifts in identity and ethical outlook, particularly in relation to food. This line of thinking was famously established in the public realm by Frances Moore Lappé in *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), where she argued that personal dietary decisions are profound acts of ethical formation. By choosing a plant-based or locally sourced diet, an individual is effectively “voting” for a more just and sustainable world. Lappé’s key contribution was to extend vegetarianism beyond a matter of private morality and into the public realm of ecology and social justice. Decades later, scholars in the anthropology of food continued to note how food-related practices are central to identity. Caplan (1997), for

example, argues that what and how we eat is intimately tied to who we are; food choices are never neutral, but instead communicate our values, cultural commitments, and sense of self. Together, these frameworks show how the mundane act of engaging with food can become a site of moral apprenticeship, where a person's identity and ethical commitments are actively shaped and expressed.

From this understanding of everyday practice as ethically significant emerges a mode of civic engagement that political theorist John Barry (2016) terms ecological citizenship. In his formulation, ecological citizenship departs from classical liberal citizenship by shifting the focus from individual rights to ecological responsibilities. Where traditional citizenship might emphasise entitlements and political participation in human society alone, ecological citizenship envisions individuals as members of a broader biotic community, bearing duties toward the environment and future generations. This perspective is inherently practice-oriented and often privately enacted. It focuses on how one lives day to day, encompassing more than just one's public roles.

Barry (2016) argues that this form of citizenship is defined by moral obligations rather than by legal rights. It is cultivated through small, private-sphere practices that reflect an ethos of responsibility, for example, a commitment to reducing one's ecological footprint through lifestyle changes. A key tenet of this framework is the virtue of stewardship and care for the commons, extending the republican ideal of the common good to include non-human life and ecosystems. Unlike conventional citizenship, which is typically exercised in public forums like voting booths or courts, ecological citizenship often materialises on the home-front. Furthermore, Barry's concept allows for a form of citizenship that can transcend national borders. When a person feels accountable to preserve land and resources outside of their own country, they are practicing a kind of translocal ecological citizenship rooted in a shared sense

of ecological care rather than a shared passport. This broadened sense of civic duty, built on personal practice and ethical commitment, therefore complements formal environmental policies by instilling an ethic of care at the individual and community level.

Central to these ethical frameworks is the concept of an economy of care: an informal exchange system grounded not in monetary gain but in support. Lans (2016), drawing on a review of WWOOF in Canada, explicitly frames volunteer farm networks as part of a care economy, noting that participants contribute to “farm care” in exchange for hospitality. Unlike market transactions, this exchange is imbued with non-material value: hosts open their homes and impart knowledge, while volunteers offer labour and companionship - a reciprocity of care that benefits both parties. Lans observes that volunteer help provides farm families with precious time off and social connection, highlighting how human care and ecological care intersect on these farms. This resonates with arguments by Goodman and DuPuis (2005) that many alternative food networks operate on principles of ethics. They suggest that such networks form a kind of “ethical economy” or “economy of regard,” in which participants exchange goods and services in ways that also build community and express shared values. Goodman and DuPuis (2005) also point out that these caring economies often absorb the social costs that the global industrial food system externalizes. Small-scale organic farms, for instance, rely on community support and unpaid help to survive in a market that favours big agribusiness; in doing so, they are collectively caring for the land and each other in ways that compensate for the shortcomings of the profit-driven system.

On a broader, more political scale, these principles find complementary expression in the food sovereignty movement. While the care economy focuses on interpersonal and community exchange, food sovereignty enacts care as a collective political project. As defined by transnational movements like La Vía Campesina, food sovereignty is fundamentally about the

right of peoples to define and control their own food and agriculture systems: a vision that centres care for heritage as a guiding value. Edelman et al. (2014) describes food sovereignty as both a mobilizing ideal and a set of evolving practices aimed at transforming food systems in favour of local needs and ecological well-being. This vision directly challenges the top-down authority of neoliberal markets. As Amy Trauger (2014) argues, food sovereignty “draws on alternative domains” to establish new rights for food producers and consumers, shifting power to the grassroots.

A central tenet of the movement is its championing of agroecology as not just a set of techniques, but a philosophy of farming with nature. As van der Ploeg (2014) notes, when freed from oppressive policies, small-scale farmers often prove to be the world’s most capable stewards of the land, displaying remarkable capacity. This perspective sees smallholders as key agents of care. However, the framework is not without internal debate. Agarwal (2014), for instance, raises critical questions about potential contradictions, such as when a community’s “democratic choice” might conflict with strict ecological ideals. Such debates highlight the movement’s commitment to self-determination. Food sovereignty thus broadens the scope of care from the farm and household to the arena of rights and policies, insisting that caring for the earth and each other should be a cornerstone of how we organize agriculture at every level.

While these various frameworks – ecological citizenship, care economies, and food sovereignty – paint an inspiring picture of ethical practice, a comprehensive review must also acknowledge the tensions and critiques that scholars have raised. Researchers caution that the lived reality of initiatives like volunteer farm networks can fall short of their lofty rhetoric. For instance, Wengel et al. (2018), in a key case study of WWOOF in New Zealand, found that the movement’s “positively framed” ideals are often challenged by on-the-ground dynamics. They uncovered “critical tensions regarding the interpretation and practice” of care and

sustainability, observing that some volunteers are motivated less by agrarian idealism and more by affordable travel, which can lead to misaligned expectations with hosts who may prioritize labour over co-learning.

These findings complicate the notion of such farms as pure “spaces of care,” suggesting that power imbalances or touristic motivations can be significant factors. Misra (2023) further argues that there is often a gap between the rhetoric of care and its reality in sustainable food volunteering – the warm language of the global community might mask unequal exchanges or prove difficult to sustain once the volunteer returns to ordinary life. A critical concern raised in the literature is scalability: the intimate, relationship-based ethics fostered on a small organic farm may not directly translate to structural change in the broader food system. Misra questions whether these micro-level care practices can be amplified to challenge macro-level forces like corporate agriculture. In a similar vein, Edelman et al. (2014) notes that even the more political food sovereignty movement faces practical obstacles when moving from vision to implementation, such as the challenges of localization in a globalized market. These critiques inject a dose of realism, highlighting the need for constant reflexivity within such movements.

Most importantly, the theoretical landscape surrounding care, ethics, and sustainability is rich and complex. The foundational work of Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) provides a powerful lens for understanding care as a negotiated, material practice. This is complemented by frameworks that explore how this care is enacted through the ethics of food and identity (Caplan, 1997; Lappé, 1991) expressed as a form of ecological citizenship (Barry, 2016), structured within non-monetary care economies (Lans, 2016; Goodman & DuPuis, 2005), and scaled up into a political project of food sovereignty. Acknowledging the critical perspectives on the limits and tensions of these ideals is crucial for a grounded analysis. This thesis will now apply this comprehensive theoretical toolkit to the ethnographic context of WWOOF and its related

networks. The following analytical chapters will explore how these concepts: care, ethics, and sustainability, are lived, negotiated, contested, and reimagined in the day-to-day practices of the farms and the volunteers who inhabit them.

Resilience and Adaptability in Social-Ecological Networks

The concept of resilience is central to understanding how systems endure and adapt in the face of disturbance. The term has evolved from a specific ecological meaning into a complex and contested social framework. A full appreciation of resilience requires tracing this intellectual journey. In this review, I trace the evolution of this concept, beginning with foundational ecological concepts. I then explore the development of social-ecological frameworks and ground these theories in recent empirical studies. The narrative concludes with a critical examination of the political and ontological dimensions of resilience. This exploration will set the stage for a nuanced analysis of the volunteering networks central to this research. It will allow us to ask not just if it is resilient, but how it is resilient. The literature also invites us to question for whom it is resilient and what kind of worlds its resilience helps to sustain.

The contemporary conversation on resilience starts with the work of ecologist C.S. Holling (1973). He challenged the dominant paradigm in ecology which viewed natural systems through the lens of stability. The prevailing assumption was that ecosystems tended toward a single, balanced state. He argued this view could not explain the persistence of real-world systems, such as the forests and fisheries he studied, as they were constantly in flux. His central question was not about how systems maintain constancy; instead, he asked how they endure through change. He therefore proposed a new definition of resilience as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while still retaining its essential function and structure. This definition shifted the focus from a single equilibrium to the idea of multiple stable states, which he termed domains of attraction. He theorised that a system could be “flipped” by a

shock across a threshold into an entirely new domain where a different set of processes and relationships would dominate, and from which it might not easily return.

His work also introduced a crucial insight that complicates any simple pursuit of stability, which he explained the paradox of “instability” (p. 15). He demonstrated that frequent, small-scale fluctuations can be essential for maintaining large-scale resilience, using the classic example of the spruce budworm forest (pp. 17-18). In that system, periodic insect outbreaks are a form of instability that is necessary for the long-term health and persistence of the diverse forest ecosystem. This led him to warn of the danger of managing for stability. Using the example of the Great Lakes fisheries, he argued that trying to eliminate natural population fluctuations to achieve a predictable yield could reduce a system’s resilience, making it brittle and vulnerable to collapse from an unexpected event. His work thus established resilience as a dynamic concept rooted in persistence through change.

While Holling provided the ecological blueprint, the next crucial question was whether this concept could be meaningfully applied to human societies. W. Neil Adger (2000) was a key scholar who built this disciplinary bridge by seeking to understand how communities cope with external stresses, particularly those dependent on ecological resources. He defined social resilience as the ability of communities to withstand these shocks to their social infrastructure. He argued that this capacity is determined by the social fabric of the community itself and is not just an individual phenomenon. His work showed that social resilience is intrinsically linked to two key factors. The first is the strength of institutions, which includes the formal and informal rules that govern a society. The second is social capital, which refers to features like trust and networks that facilitate cooperation; this can be seen in the very fabric of the volunteer economy, where personal relationships between hosts and volunteers often form the basis for successful exchanges.

To test this theory, Adger (2000) studied the impacts of mangrove conversion on coastal communities in Vietnam. He showed how government policies promoting privatisation eroded the traditional common-property institutions that had long managed the resource. This institutional breakdown, in turn, undermined the community's collective ability to manage its resources, leading to increased social conflict and reduced social resilience. His work was pivotal because it established that the resilience of an ecosystem and a dependent community are deeply intertwined; damaging one can directly undermine the other. He also highlighted how resource dependency can shape resilience, noting that while diverse livelihood strategies can act as a buffer, a high reliance on a narrow range of resources can increase a community's vulnerability.

Building on these foundations, scholars from the Resilience Alliance, including Brian Walker and Carl Folke, worked to create a more comprehensive framework for analysing social–ecological systems. They sought to provide practical concepts for navigating towards sustainability in a world defined by change. In their work, Walker et al. (2004) and Folke et al. (2010) introduced a critical distinction between several related capacities. Resilience is the capacity to absorb disturbance and stay within the same basin of attraction, retaining the same function, structure, and identity. This is different from adaptability, which is the capacity of human actors within the system to intentionally influence that resilience. A third capacity, transformability, involves the more radical ability to create a fundamentally new system when the existing one becomes untenable. This framework moves beyond simply “bouncing back” to consider how systems can be actively managed or deliberately re-created.

To make the concept more concrete, Walker et al. (2004) broke resilience down into four interacting components. Latitude refers to how much a system can be disturbed before it loses its ability to recover. Resistance is the difficulty of changing the system's state. Precariousness

describes how close the system is to a critical threshold. Finally, panarchy is the influence of cross-scale dynamics, where shocks can cascade from global events down to local realities, a process clearly observed during the COVID-19 pandemic as global travel restrictions directly impacted labour availability on individual host farms. Folke et al. (2010) added another vital layer with the distinction between specified resilience and general resilience. Specified resilience focuses on a system's ability to handle known shocks, answering the question "resilience of what, to what?" General resilience, in contrast, is the capacity to deal with all kinds of shocks, including novel and surprising ones. This reveals a critical trade-off, as a system highly optimised for specified resilience can become fragile and lose its general resilience to the unexpected.

These theoretical frameworks find strong empirical grounding in recent studies of alternative agricultural systems. A study by Savels et al. (2024) on community-supported agriculture farms, for example, provides compelling quantitative evidence of these links. The authors found a strong, significant correlation between a farm's adherence to agroecological principles and its resilience score. Their work suggests that resilience is an "emergent property of advanced agroecological systems" (p.13). Similarly, Brune et al. (2023) examined family farms during the COVID-19 crisis and reached comparable conclusions. They reported that diversification was paramount to resilience and that peer-to-peer knowledge networks were a crucial source of information for adapting. Both studies, however, surface a critical tension: the resilience of the farm system often comes at the expense of the well-being of the individuals within it. The latter study concludes that farmers had to embrace risks, sometimes at the expense of personal resilience, leading to exhaustion and mental strain, while the former questions the sustainability of models that depend heavily on unpaid labour and farmer "self-exploitation."

This tension opens the door to a more fundamental critique of the resilience concept itself. Scholars working from social theory challenge the direct application of ecological concepts to society, arguing that such a move can obscure crucial questions of power and equity. Cote and Nightingale (2012) insist that any analysis of resilience must begin with the normative question: “resilience of what, and for whom?” They argue that resilience is never a neutral property but is always a political process, where a system that is resilient for one group may be oppressive for another. They critique the “functionalist” view of institutions for ignoring the contested power relations and cultural values that shape them, arguing instead that knowledge is a situated process embedded in these very power dynamics.

To address these concerns, this thesis shifts from abstract critique toward a grounded analysis of how resilience is enacted in everyday practice. Rather than viewing the WWOOF network as a formal organisation, I analyse it as a dynamic social-ecological system. This perspective is illuminated by Holling’s (1973) paradox of “instability”, as we discussed previously, which suggests that apparent weakness can be a source of strength. Applied here, the constant fluctuation in individual host-volunteer relationships is not a sign of the network’s failure but is arguably the source of its overall strength. This inherent flexibility allows the system to exhibit general resilience, capable of absorbing unforeseen shocks like a pandemic precisely because it is not a rigid, centrally managed entity.

Crucially, the idea that resilience in these networks is a social, not just ecological, phenomenon is central to this thesis. It is built upon the informal institutional norms of reciprocity and the social capital generated through thousands of contingent relationships. This approach, therefore, allows for a deeper examination of how the decentralised structure and relational ties within this “mixed economy of volunteering” enable it to adapt and persist.

The practical strategies for navigating disturbance, as documented in recent studies, provide a grounded lens for understanding the actions of participants in this volunteer economy. Take the case of Veridian Farm, where the pivot to local volunteers during the pandemic illustrates the diversification and re-organisation that Brune et al. (2023) identified as crucial for farm survival. Insights from these studies, alongside the findings of Savels et al. (2024) on the trade-offs involving personal resilience and reliance on non-traditional labour give a theoretical anchor to the lived experiences of participants in this study. This allows us to move beyond a celebratory account and pay close attention to the uneven distribution of emotional and economic burdens.

Finally, a critical analysis requires engaging with deeper theoretical challenges. We need to move beyond functional analysis and grapple with the political questions posed by Cote and Nightingale (2012). Is the ability of these volunteer networks to survive, adapt, and continue existing a purely positive thing for everyone involved, or are there hidden costs and negative aspects we need to consider? Their work prompts caution, inviting us to ask the central question of “resilience for whom?”. This frames the power dynamics between hosts and volunteers as a key line of inquiry for the research. This perspective allows the thesis to explore how resilience emerges from the interplay of different practices within the mixed economy of volunteering. I explore how participants, through their daily actions, whether engaging with digital tools or with the land cultivate forms of resilience that are fragile, situated, and partial.

Gaps in the Literature

The preceding sections have traced a trajectory in the scholarly engagement with WWOOF, moving from an early focus on alternative tourism and sustainable agriculture to more recent critiques of the social movement framing. Scholars have increasingly recognized that WWOOF’s significance lies not solely in its capacity to challenge industrial agriculture or to

form part of a collective activist identity, but in its function as a heterogeneous network of ecological practices. WWOOF emerges as a site where participants learn by doing, engage in reciprocal exchanges with hosts, and experience belonging through embodied interactions with the land. Despite these conceptual advancements, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these processes unfold, how participants make sense of their engagements, and how resilience and adaptability manifest in practice.

Firstly, while WWOOF has often been situated within debates on sustainability and voluntourism, much of the literature still draws on frames inherited from social movement theory (Mostafanezhad, 2016; Terry, 2014; Tecco et al., 2016). These studies have been valuable in illuminating WWOOF's potential to galvanize interest in sustainable food systems, organic farming, and alternative economic models. Yet this macro-level perspective tends to assume a kind of political intentionality or collective identity that may not reflect the everyday realities experienced by participants. Empirical evidence suggests that many volunteers and hosts are not primarily driven by activism; instead, they seek practical skills, cultural immersion, affordable travel, or personal growth (Miller & Mair, 2015; Wengel et al., 2018; Yamamoto & Engelsted, 2014). The emphasis on collective ideology therefore risks overlooking the complexity and nuance inherent in participants' motivations and experiences. We lack studies that systematically explore these personal narratives and how they fit, or fail to fit, into broader political or activist agendas. In other words, the literature needs to move beyond a binary division between activist and non-activist stances, and instead attend to the nuanced spectrum of desires, aspirations, and constraints that shape participants' involvement.

Secondly, although the notion of WWOOF as a network of ecological practices offers a promising conceptual shift, current research has not fully interrogated how participants engage with these practices at a micro-level. Theories of dwelling (Ingold, 2000) and communities of

practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggest that knowledge, skills, and values emerge from situated, embodied participation. In WWOOF, ecological learning happens through weeding a garden, composting organic matter, caring for livestock, or experimenting with regenerative agricultural techniques. While some studies acknowledge this embodied dimension (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; Deville et al., 2016), we still lack robust, qualitative accounts detailing how volunteers interpret these mundane but meaningful tasks. In this regard, Mol's (2021) ethnographic research, although grounded in clinical settings and domestic kitchens in the Netherlands, offers a useful conceptual extension to Ingold's (2000) dwelling perspective. Through what she terms an "empirical philosophy," Mol (2021) approaches eating as a bodily practice through which relations, values, and forms of knowing are materially enacted. Knowledge, in this account, emerges through incorporation and transformation, as food is handled, prepared, consumed, and metabolised. Attending to eating as a site of knowledge production creates a conceptual bridge between physical labour and the meanings participants derive from it, and supports closer analysis of how ethical sensibilities develop through embodied practice. How do they assign moral or symbolic significance to daily work routines? How do hosts frame tasks and responsibilities so that they convey ecological ethics, and how do volunteers internalize or contest these messages? Mol's approach here does not seek to displace established models of situated learning but rather provides the analytical tools to see these routines as vital metabolic engagements where "being" and "knowing" are co-produced through the body.

Similarly, symbolic and ritualistic elements such as shared meals remain under-examined within the literature on WWOOF, despite their recurring presence in everyday farm life. Anthropological perspectives have long suggested that such practices play an important role in reinforcing social bonds and shared values (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969). In the context of WWOOF, food is not treated simply as biological sustenance, but often becomes a medium

through which ideas about care, sustainability, and slower, more attentive ways of living are enacted and learned through everyday routines. Grasseni's (2005) work on the Slow Food movement is instructive here, particularly her analysis of how food practices cultivate attentiveness, valuation, and ethical orientation through everyday routines rather than formal instruction. She shows how food can be transformed into a reflexive object, connoted as heritage, local resource, and marker of value through shared practices of preparation, eating, and discussion. While her empirical focus is not on volunteering or agriculture per se, her insights help illuminate how food and shared meals within WWOOF settings may function as sites of informal learning and social alignment, where values are enacted rather than explicitly taught. Yet the literature on WWOOF rarely examines these cultural and ritual dimensions in detail. We know little about how recurring practices such as communal meals become symbolic anchors of ecological living, or how participants use these moments to negotiate difference, belonging, and expectation. Without closer qualitative attention to these everyday encounters, the links between practical labour, social bonding, and symbolic meaning-making remain obscured.

Thirdly, while reciprocity and exchange have been acknowledged as central to WWOOF's ethos (Yamamoto & Engelsted, 2014; Cronauer, 2012), the literature is only beginning to scratch the surface of how these dynamics are experienced and negotiated. Reciprocity in WWOOF goes beyond the straightforward swapping of labour for accommodation and extends into realms of trust, care, and moral obligation. Participants may feel compelled to "repay" the generosity of their hosts not just through labour, but also through sharing cultural knowledge, culinary traditions, or emotional support. Conversely, hosts may negotiate their own sense of obligation, balancing the need for reliable labour with the desire to foster a nurturing learning environment. Yet we lack sustained ethnographic or interpretive studies examining these negotiations. How do hosts and volunteers communicate expectations, set boundaries, or

manage disappointments? What happens when reciprocity breaks down, leading to feelings of exploitation or frustration? Mauss's (1954/2002) foundational ideas about gift exchange, as well as more contemporary theories on reciprocity and care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), remain underutilised in the WWOOF literature. As a result, we have only a partial view of how care is enacted, challenged, or reframed within these relationships. This thesis contributes to this gap by offering a more nuanced, qualitative account of how care and labour are negotiated within WWOOF. It examines the balance between altruism and self-interest, as well as the tensions between idealised models of ecological living and the practical realities of agricultural settings.

Fourthly, the concept of sustainability itself, while central to WWOOF's mission, has rarely been dissected in terms of how participants practice and interpret it. Sustainability is not just a policy goal or a marketing slogan; within WWOOF, it takes the form of composting toilets, mulching techniques, seed saving, rainwater harvesting, and other tangible practices. Although some scholarship highlights participants' environmental learning (McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006), we do not know enough about the tensions that arise when ideals of sustainability meet the practical constraints of farming life. Are volunteers disappointed when confronted with the hard work and inconsistencies of "real" sustainable agriculture as opposed to an idealized vision? Do hosts sometimes compromise on certain ecological principles in order to maintain economic viability? These everyday negotiations are critical to understanding sustainability as a lived practice rather than an abstract principle. Without more detailed ethnographic evidence, we risk flattening the complexity and variability of sustainable engagement within WWOOF.

Finally, the literature on resilience and adaptability, though conceptually rich, has yet to be fully grounded in participants' own narratives and experiences. Resilience theory (Adger, 2000; Folke et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2004) provides a valuable framework for understanding

how WWOOF and similar volunteer-based farming networks respond to shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but we still know relatively little about how participants experienced these disruptions at the ground level. The pandemic forced WWOOF to adapt through digital channels, longer volunteer stays, or more localized participation. While these adaptations demonstrate resilience in a broad sense, the literature does not yet capture the unevenness of these experiences. Some participants may have welcomed longer stays as opportunities for deeper learning, while others found them restrictive or stressful. Some hosts might have flourished under new arrangements, while others struggled to replace lost volunteer labour. More localised, qualitative accounts could reveal how resilience is felt, interpreted, and potentially contested by different actors in the network. Such findings could, in turn, refine our theoretical understanding of resilience as not just a system-level property, but also as something experienced, made sense of, and acted upon by individuals embedded in ecological-social webs.

In sum, the gaps in the literature revolve around a lack of fine-grained, contextually rich, and participant-centered analyses. In my opinion, we need more qualitative research that attends to how volunteers and hosts actively make sense of their ecological engagements, negotiate reciprocity and care, and adapt to changing conditions. We need to understand how sustainability is lived and learned, not just proclaimed, and how resilience manifests in the day-to-day interactions and moral negotiations that sustain the network. This thesis, therefore, addresses these gaps by shifting the focus from broad ideological framings and static descriptions to the nuanced, embodied practices and relationships that animate WWOOF. In doing so, it aims to illuminate the deeper currents of meaning, value, and adaptation that shape this social network of ecological practices. This thesis seeks to address these gaps by employing qualitative methodologies: analysis of web-based material, participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations to capture the richness and variability of WWOOF experiences. In

doing so, it aims to offer a more grounded understanding of how ecological practices, care, reciprocity, and resilience unfold in real time, providing insights that challenge simplified narratives and contribute to a more integrative theoretical framework for analysing volunteer-based, sustainability-oriented networks.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The ache in my back after my first attempt at turning the compost at Veridian Farm was a visceral teacher. My muscles, initially resistant, gradually found their rhythm; the correct angle of the shove, the most efficient way to move through the dense, damp matter. It was how the body learns and changes, something I felt in more ways than one. Later that day, sharing a meal with Sophie, Isabel, Helen, Kathy, and Jessie with her two young sons, Adam and Jamie, all local volunteers from nearby, things began to click even more. Amidst conversations that drifted from who was vegan or vegetarian to the addictive nature of smoking, and the distinct scent of basil pesto which Jessie's boys could identify with accuracy, I saw learning in such a raw way.

The children ran off to catch frogs, collect snails, and learn the names of salads and vegetables by their smell. Their senses wide open to everything around them. My own body was learning too, not just the mechanics of farm work, but tuning into these subtle ways of knowing, much like finding the right way to use the shovel. Moments like these, when physical strain gradually yielded to skill and casual conversation revealed shared worlds, began to show me how to look and how to be.

Chapter Aims and Methodological Overview

Before outlining the aims and structure of this methodological chapter, it is necessary to reflect briefly on my positionality as a researcher, particularly in relation to the choice of research context. During both fieldwork and the course of this research, I was asked why, as a Malaysian researcher, I chose to study agriculture and ecological volunteering in the UK rather than in Southeast Asia. This question became an important point of reflection for clarifying my positionality. My engagement with WWOOF did not begin from a prior familiarity with British farming, but from an earlier encounter during my Master's research in the UK, where I met a volunteer whose account of organic agriculture and environmental commitment prompted my initial interest in the network, an encounter that is reflected in the opening vignette of this thesis. At the time, I had little knowledge of WWOOF itself. What drew me to study it in the UK was not the assumption that British agriculture was exemplary, but the recognition that WWOOF originated and became institutionally stabilised here over several decades, allowing it to be examined as a relatively enduring cultural and organisational form rather than as a short-lived intervention.

This research interest is also shaped by my own background and disciplinary trajectory. I grew up in Malaysia, where my grandparents cultivated fruit trees, including mangoes, and maintained coconut palms using forms of local, experience-based knowledge rather than formal agricultural training. These practices were not articulated as “ecological” in contemporary academic terms, but they involved situated knowledge about soil, seasons, and care for plants that informed how I later recognised learning-through-practice in WWOOF settings. Prior to this PhD, I trained in conservation biology, where ecological engagement was framed largely through measurement, management, and technical intervention. My turn to anthropology emerged from a growing sense that such approaches were limited in their ability

to account for how people live with land, learn collectively, and negotiate ethical commitments in everyday practice. Studying agriculture in the UK therefore became a way to trace how ecological values are enacted, stabilised, and contested within a long-standing volunteering network. At the same time, it required remaining attentive to how my own experiences of farming knowledge, migration, and disciplinary transition shaped both what I noticed and how I interpreted it. These considerations provide important context for how the research was carried out and how its findings are interpreted.

My relationship to WWOOF in this research was that of an independent researcher and participant-observer, rather than an organisational insider. I did not hold any formal role within WWOOF UK, nor was the research conducted in collaboration with, or on behalf of, the organisation. Access to the field emerged through bottom-up connections with individual hosts, volunteers, and publicly available online material, rather than through institutional gatekeeping. As a result, organisational perspectives and policy-level intentions are not systematically represented in this study, reflecting a deliberate methodological decision to foreground how WWOOF is lived, negotiated, and made meaningful in everyday practice by those directly involved in hosting and volunteering.

Building on this context, the chapter now turns to the design of the study and the qualitative methods through which the research was conducted. Understanding how WWOOF participants navigate complex concepts of belonging, reciprocity, care, and sustainability, particularly across the contrasting contexts of digital engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and immersive, physical farm settings post-restrictions demanded a flexible and multifaceted approach. Consequently, this research employed a combination of analysis of web-based material (primarily the analysis of online vlogs), in-depth participant observation, semi-

structured interviews, and informal conversations to investigate how WWOOFers and hosts co-create and sustain ecological practices within their unique community settings.

The qualitative approach adopted here is deeply rooted in interpretive methods, seeking to capture the lived realities that define the WWOOF network. Rather than viewing WWOOF strictly through a social movement or activist lens, this research draws on theoretical insights from Ingold's (2000) concept of dwelling and Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice (CoP) to understand WWOOF as a community engaged in embodied ecological practices. These frameworks allow a focus on how participants relate to their environment through the practical actions involved in organic farming and environmental stewardship. By approaching WWOOF as a network sustained by shared ecological practices rather than collective activism, this study captures a more nuanced view of how participants find meaning, purpose, and community through their work with the land.

To transparently lay out this methodological journey, the chapter proceeds through several key sections. It begins by detailing the overarching 'Research Approach,' further elaborating on the qualitative framework and its alignment with the study's aims. The significant pivot required by the COVID-19 pandemic is then addressed, explaining the integration of analysis of web-based material and how online platforms became vital research sites. Following this, the discussion moves to 'Participant Observation in the Post-Pandemic Context,' recounting the immersive fieldwork experiences that provided a firsthand look at embodied ecological practices. The crucial role of 'Interviews and Informal Conversations' in capturing diverse participant perspectives is then explored. Subsequently, the chapter outlines the 'Data Analysis' procedures, specifically the thematic analysis employed to interpret findings in relation to the core themes of belonging, reciprocity, care, and resilience. Finally, and of paramount importance, the 'Ethical Considerations' underpinning every stage of the research:

from informed consent and privacy in both digital and physical realms to researcher reflexivity are thoroughly discussed. Together, these sections will demonstrate how the selected methods facilitate a nuanced understanding of the WWOOF network including its operation within a ‘mixed economy of volunteering’, as experienced and enacted by its participants within the specific contexts of this study.

Research Approach

Qualitative Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was chosen to investigate the WWOOF Exchange as a social network of ecological practices, focusing on how participants engage with sustainability, reciprocity, care, and belonging. The qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective, embodied, and relational aspects of participants’ experiences. This approach is well-suited to uncovering the nuances of participants’ interactions with the land, each other, and the WWOOF community, providing a way to capture complex, lived practices that may otherwise be obscured in quantitative research. Through in-depth qualitative methods, the study aims to reveal how individuals find meaning and develop connections within WWOOF while negotiating roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

A core rationale for the qualitative approach is its ability to capture experiential and relational practices in ways that extend beyond surface-level descriptions. WWOOF functions as a network where participants engage directly with the environment through farming that is physically and emotionally demanding. Thus, a qualitative approach provides the flexibility to explore how these practices sustain environmental stewardship and, crucially, foster connections rooted in shared experiences of labour, learning, and care. Qualitative data, derived from interviews, participant observation, and analysis of web-based material captures the

subtleties of ecological and interpersonal engagement, particularly in how participants articulate their expectations, reflect on their experiences, and express a sense of community.

The Interpretive Approach and Its Relevance to WWOOF

At its core, an interpretive research approach seeks to understand social phenomena through the eyes of the participants themselves. It prioritizes the subjective meanings, values, and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences and actions, focusing on the "why" and "how" of human behaviour in specific contexts. This study adopts such an approach because WWOOF is not a monolithic entity with a uniform set of rules, but a dynamic network animated by the diverse and personal ways participants find meaning. Therefore, an interpretive methodology is essential for capturing these relational practices and subjective realities. To guide this interpretation, the study draws on specific conceptual frameworks that align with this focus on lived experience. Ingold's (2000) theory of dwelling and Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice are particularly relevant. Both frameworks emphasise how individuals learn, engage, and create meaning through situated, embodied action, making them ideal tools for interpreting how participants cultivate ecological knowledge and form relationships within a network sustained by a shared, yet loosely defined, ethos.

This interpretive lens is particularly suited to exploring the social processes through which knowledge is co-created. The concept of communities of practice (CoP), for instance, provides a framework for investigating how skills and understanding are developed through active social engagement rather than formal instruction. The methodology is therefore designed to capture the moments of shared practice where participants, such as volunteers working alongside hosts, learn and negotiate meaning. The suitability of this approach for the WWOOF context is supported by previous research, such as the work of Wengel (2018), who successfully used

interpretive methods, specifically unstructured interviews, participant observation, and a reflexive journal (pp. 98-99) to reveal how knowledge sharing is embedded in the relational aspects of host-guest interactions. This qualitative approach is thus chosen for its capacity to delve into the rich, subjective meanings participants attach to their work. Most importantly, this interpretive perspective provides the tools to trace how WWOOFers might move from peripheral to more integrated roles, developing their understanding and identity as ecological practitioners through hands-on involvement.

Understanding Meanings, Practices, and Relationships

The qualitative methods selected for this study, including analysis of web-based material, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews, are particularly well suited for examining the complex meanings, practices, and relationships that characterize the WWOOF network. The Analysis of web-based material, for example, allows for the examination of digital content such as YouTube vlogs, where WWOOFers shared their experiences and ecological values during the pandemic when in-person interactions were limited. This method enables an examination of how participants maintained connections, expressed care for the environment, and shared knowledge in a time of physical distancing. By capturing these expressions visually and contextually, this form of web-based material offers insights into how digital platforms became extensions of the WWOOF network, sustaining a sense of community even when participants were unable to meet in person.

Participant observation on farms, conducted post-pandemic, adds depth by immersing the researcher directly in the WWOOF environment. This method provides access to the embodied aspects of WWOOF, where practices of care and reciprocity are not just discussed but lived. Participant observation is essential for observing the dynamic interactions between WWOOFers and hosts, as well as the ways in which participants collaborate through their daily

routines. The method allows the researcher to witness firsthand the relational practices that define the WWOOF experience, capturing elements of belonging and resilience that are central to the network's sustainability.

Finally, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with WWOOFers and hosts allow for an in-depth exploration of their expectations, perspectives, and reflections on their experiences. Interviews provide a structured yet flexible space for participants to articulate their reasons for joining WWOOF, their perceptions of its impact, and the significance they find in participating. By combining interviews with informal conversations, the study captures both the planned responses and spontaneous insights that arise in the course of daily farm life. This dual approach offers a fuller picture of the relational and ecological practices within WWOOF, highlighting how these practices foster a sense of purpose, care, and ethical engagement among participants.

This method added significant richness to the data by capturing the subtleties of participants' lived experiences and interactions in their own words. The informal setting often put participants at ease, fostering open and candid exchanges that provided depth to the research. These conversations, alongside the formal interviews and participant observation, complemented the semi-structured interviews by offering a more holistic understanding of participants' experiences and how they navigated daily activities and relationships within the network. By integrating these diverse forms of verbal data collection with other ethnographic methods, the research captured a layered, deeply contextualized perspective on life within these ecological social networks.

Adapting to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Analysis of Web-Based Material

This research trajectory was further shaped by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions and lockdowns initially prevented in-person fieldwork and required me to recalibrate both my research design and my own learning process. During this period, I encountered ethnography less through formal training alone and more through informal, self-directed means, including recorded lectures, interviews, and methodological discussions available on platforms such as YouTube. Rather than treating this as a deficit, I came to see it as part of my situated entry into ethnographic practice: learning how to observe, listen, and reflect under constrained conditions. Under these conditions, access to WWOOF unfolded primarily through publicly available digital platforms, dispersed host–volunteer networks, and online narratives, foregrounding forms of engagement and observation that differed from conventional site-based ethnography.

The constraints introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a methodological shift toward digital and remote forms of engagement at a point when in-person fieldwork was not possible. While the study was originally designed to explore the WWOOF network through immersive participant observation on farms across various locations, travel restrictions and health concerns required a reconsideration of how participants and practices could be accessed. This section therefore details the use of analysis of web-based material as a complementary approach to in-person fieldwork, enabling continued engagement with WWOOF participants through digital platforms during the height of the pandemic. By examining online expressions of community ethos, belonging, and care, this approach preserved the momentum of the research while adding a digital layer to the broader ethnographic framework.

Impact of COVID-19 on Fieldwork

The pandemic altered my original research design, which aimed for an in-depth exploration of WWOOF farms and communities through on-site observation and interviews. The initial intent was to observe ecological practices and relational dynamics within the WWOOF network by directly engaging with hosts and volunteers in their physical settings. However, in early 2020, as global travel restrictions took effect and concerns around health and safety escalated, the feasibility of in-person research became uncertain. Many WWOOF farms, facing restrictions on gatherings and volunteer limitations, either closed temporarily or limited their activities. This situation presented substantial logistical and ethical challenges, as the safety of both participants and researchers had to be prioritized.

The necessity for adaptation led to a methodological shift that incorporated web-based material as a primary research tool during the height of the pandemic. This decision enabled me to maintain engagement with the WWOOF community remotely, focusing on digital content that participants shared online. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and WWOOF's social media pages became valuable spaces for observing and analysing how participants navigated the challenges of the pandemic, expressed their connections to the WWOOF network, and sustained ecological values despite physical constraints. In addition to analysis of web-based material, I conducted online interviews with volunteers, allowing for direct engagement with participants and access to personal narratives around their experiences during this period. These digital adaptations not only sustained the research but also provided unique insights into the resilience of the WWOOF community, capturing how members adapted to global disruptions while remaining committed to sustainability and shared ecological practices.

Analysis of web-based material

Analysis of web-based material emerged as an effective method for studying the WWOOF community's online representations and interactions, particularly as physical access to farms was restricted. Recent trends emphasise the growing importance of visual methods across disciplines, including anthropology, where they offer unique insights into how individuals and communities represent and construct their identities in various contexts (Pink, 2004; Rakić & Chambers, 2009). For this study, the focus was primarily on understanding the WWOOF experience from the volunteer's perspective. Therefore, this approach specifically involved the analysis of publicly available, WWOOF-related YouTube vlogs created predominantly by WWOOFers, along with their accompanying comment sections.

While some host-generated vlogs exist, particularly promotional series such as 'Why I am a WWOOF Host' often published by national WWOOF organisations, these were generally excluded from the core dataset to prioritize WWOOFer voices and mitigate the potential bias inherent in organisationally-endorsed or promotional content. These WWOOFer-created vlogs served as a rich window into their reflections and self-presentations during and around the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many WWOOFers used these platforms to document their routines, share their thoughts on sustainable farming and community, and reflect on their roles within the network. Wesch (2008) described how platforms like YouTube foster a hyper self-awareness, where individuals, speaking to the camera, engage in a self-reflexive mode, often uninhibited in their monologues. These vlogs provided multimodal records, capturing facial expressions, gaze, gestures, and body posture (Jewitt, 2012), allowing for a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of participants' experiences.

To gather the data for this analysis of web-based material, a multi-stage purposive sampling strategy (as outlined by Palinkas et al., 2015) was employed. The initial pool of videos was

identified using Google's advanced search function, filtered for "site:youtube.com" over a ten-year period (2015-2024). A systematic keyword search using the terms "WWOOF" and "exchange" in combination was used to filter for relevant content. The second keyword, "exchange," was crucial to methodologically distinguish results related to the WWOOF organisation from the vast number of unrelated videos connected to the onomatopoeic² "woof" or "wwoof" (e.g., dog barks), thereby ensuring the relevance of the data. This process yielded an initial dataset of several hundred videos. From this pool, a final, smaller sample of approximately 34 vlogs was selected for in-depth qualitative analysis. The inclusion criteria for this final sample were: (a) a primary narrative focus on the volunteer's lived experience; (b) a video length and format that provided sufficient reflective depth; and (c) clear audio quality suitable for transcription and analysis. To maintain this clear focus on the volunteer's perspective, host-generated vlogs, particularly promotional series often published by national WWOOF organisations were generally excluded from this final sample to prioritize the analysis of unsolicited, peer-to-peer narratives and mitigate the bias inherent in organisationally-endorsed content.

This final sample, consisting of approximately 34 unique WWOOF-related YouTube vlogs, was then subjected to in-depth ethnographic examination. The primary selection criterion was the relevance of the content to WWOOFing experiences, ecological practices, community interactions, and participant reflections. While vlogs originated from WWOOFers in diverse geographical settings (including Europe, North America, and Oceania), the analysis focused on thematic content rather than aiming for a statistically representative geographical sample. Each vlog was examined for its creator's overt purpose (e.g., informational, experiential documentary, critical review), the main topics discussed, emotional tone, visual composition,

² The term "onomatopoeic" refers to a word formed by imitating a sound associated with the object or action it describes. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the related noun, onomatopoeia, as "the formation of a word from a sound associated with what is named".

and the overall narrative arc of the WWOOFing experience presented. The accompanying comment sections were also analysed for patterns of community interaction, peer support, and shared knowledge.

By examining vlogs and their associated comments, I was able to observe how participants expressed belonging, sustainability, and care for the environment online, often portraying their experiences through idealized narratives of ecological living. Comments offered further insights, showcasing peer exchange within the WWOOF network. These digital interactions revealed how participants continued to engage with the network's core values, maintaining connections with others even as physical interactions were limited. Themes of resilience and adaptability surfaced prominently, as participants creatively adjusted their practices to fit new, often isolated, circumstances.

The types of digital data collected included:

- 1) Vlogs: Personal video diaries where WWOOFers documented their experiences, reflecting on their roles in sustainable farming and ecological stewardship.
- 2) Comments and Discussions: Online comments and discussions that offered insights into community support, shared knowledge, and expressions of solidarity within the WWOOF network.

Analysing these digital representations provided valuable insights into how participants perceived and navigated their roles within WWOOF during the pandemic. This remote method complemented the traditional ethnographic approach and enriched the study with a nuanced understanding of how ecological values and community ties were maintained through digital interactions.

While analysis of web-based material provided a practical solution during a period of restricted mobility, it also presented certain limitations. Digital representations often lack the embodied, sensory depth that in-person observation provides. Online content, such as vlogs, is frequently curated, reflecting participants' selective self-presentations. This curation could result in idealized portrayals of the WWOOF experience, focusing on positive aspects while downplaying challenges or contradictions. Furthermore, the absence of physical presence limited my ability to capture the spontaneous, nuanced interactions that occur within a communal, farm-based setting.

To address these limitations, I employed a multi-faceted approach to analysis, cross referencing digital data with insights gained from subsequent in-person fieldwork. This allowed me to contextualize online portrayals within the broader framework of WWOOF's ecological practices. By later engaging in participant observation on farms, I could compare digital expressions of ecological commitment with the lived realities of farming and community-building post-pandemic. This dual approach enriched the data, highlighting both the ways in which WWOOFers adapted their ecological practices online and the contrasts between digital and physical expressions of community and sustainability.

The adoption of analysis of web-based material in this study highlights the potential of digital methods to uncover meaningful insights during periods of disruption. While initially a response to the constraints of the pandemic, this approach expanded the study's methodological toolkit, enabling the integration of multimodal data to capture nuanced experiences of ecological engagement. By later complementing digital findings with in-person fieldwork, the research bridged online self-representations with embodied practices, offering a deeper understanding of the WWOOF network's dynamics.

This hybrid methodology demonstrates how qualitative research can adapt to unforeseen challenges while remaining focused on its core objectives, contributing to broader discussions on resilience and methodological innovation in anthropological studies. This analysis of web-based material yields specific findings that are explored in Chapter 5, notably within the ‘Digital Expressions of Belonging’ section, featuring a classification of WWOOF-related vlogs. Additional insights drawn from vlogs and other digital interactions contribute to discussions on “digital idealism” and post-participation reflections in Chapter 6, digital advocacy and ethical considerations in Chapter 7, and digital resilience in Chapter 8.

Participant Observation in the Post-Pandemic Context

As COVID-19 restrictions eased in the UK, I was able to resume in-person fieldwork on WWOOF farms, engaging directly with participants and hosts to deepen my understanding of the embodied and relational practices that define the WWOOF network. Following the initial easing of restrictions in March 2021, which allowed outdoor gatherings and expanded mobility, I began planning for fieldwork resumption. By July 2021, when the majority of restrictions were lifted, including social distancing measures, I was able to fully re-engage with the community on-site.

This transition back to physical fieldwork allowed for a nuanced, sensory-rich exploration of WWOOF’s ecological practices. This phase of the research was essential for grounding digital insights from web-based material in the lived, tactile experiences of farming and community-building, capturing the tangible ways in which WWOOF participants engage with the land and each other. Here, I outline my role as a volunteer and an observer on WWOOF farms, detailing the settings and interactions that shaped the fieldwork, and I discuss how participant observation offered unique insights into the complexities within the WWOOF network.

Fieldwork After Restrictions Eased

Once travel restrictions were lifted, I resumed fieldwork on WWOOF farms to observe ecological practices and relational dynamics firsthand. This in-person approach reconnected the study with its original ethnographic goals, allowing for a deeper exploration that was not fully accessible during the digital phase. My fieldwork spanned six WWOOF-related sites across England.

The earliest of these engagements was an initial visit to Valley Organic (West Yorkshire) in August 2020. From May 2021 and continuing through to December 2022, I maintained a regular, long-term engagement with Veridian Farm (County Durham), a permaculture-based workers' cooperative; this typically involved weekly visits of two days, supplemented by occasional weekend volunteering when the host, Daniel, required additional help. During this broader period of engagement with Veridian Farm, I also undertook a more intensive six-week return visit to Valley Organic in September and October 2021. Following this, I spent four weeks in February 2022 at The Green Plot (East Yorkshire), a certified organic market garden run by a solo host, Grace. Subsequently, in April 2022, I was at The Bridge Institute (Northeast England), a larger, structured residential NGO campus, for six weeks. My stay at Oakhaven (York), a family-run smallholding managed by Arthur and Julie, lasted for two weeks in May 2022. It was during this time at Oakhaven that the opportunity for a unique day visit to Hearthside Garden (North Yorkshire), a small-scale permaculture garden run by Marie, arose in May 2022. Arthur connected me with Marie; at Oakhaven, Arthur and Julie generally did not require volunteer assistance on weekends, preferring this time for themselves and also allowing volunteers the flexibility for personal time, such as visiting York, even while staying in the provided accommodation. Arthur thoughtfully suggested I might spend one of these weekend days assisting Marie.

These sites were selected to represent the network's diversity, ranging from the small, family-run organic setting of Oakhaven to more structured operations like The Bridge Institute, or the cooperative model of Veridian Farm, showcasing a variety of approaches to sustainable farming, including permaculture, certified organic methods, and educational outreach. As a participant-observer, my days were typically structured around the agricultural seasons and the specific needs of each farm. Common routines involved a range of hands-on activities such as sowing seeds, transplanting seedlings, weeding garden beds, and harvesting fruits and vegetables. Depending on the site, tasks could also include animal care, the turning and management of compost systems, preparing organic fertilizers, general site maintenance like mending fences or clearing paths, and participation in communal food preparation (see Appendix D Figure 1, 2 and 3). This active participation facilitated a deeper understanding of farm life and fostered a collaborative environment for gathering insights.

The participant observation took place on these farms, each offering unique insights into the practices and values central to the WWOOF network. As a participant-observer, I actively engaged in farming activities, shared meals, and participated in informal conversations with hosts and fellow WWOOFers. This hands-on involvement provided valuable insights into the day-to-day practices of an organic farm. For instance, my day visit to Hearthside Garden offered distinct insights despite its brevity. While there, I assisted Marie, who experienced back pain, with physically demanding tasks in her backyard garden, such as clearing specific areas and lifting some heavy items she couldn't manage alone. This demonstrated how my volunteer role could flexibly adapt to immediate host needs and varying contexts of engagement, and the direct assistance also facilitated conversation about her gardening philosophies and the practicalities of maintaining a small-scale permaculture garden with physical limitations. Being physically present allowed me to observe the nuances of interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and knowledge-sharing that emerged through collaborative labour. The sensory and

physical aspects of farm work further deepened my understanding of the dedication required to sustain ecological practices.

Participant observation was key to understanding the hands-on, physical nature of WWOOFing. By taking part in the daily work on organic farms, I was able to see how day-to-day farming life unfolded and how hosts and volunteers interacted. A typical day as a volunteer often meant getting directly involved in various farm jobs. Some tasks required careful attention, such as weeding young plants in polytunnels or preparing soil beds for new seeds. Other jobs were more physically demanding, like turning compost heaps or helping with general farm upkeep, for instance, mending fences. What a volunteer can generally expect is this kind of practical, hands-on work. For example, understanding a farm's specific methods for keeping soil healthy or managing pests often came from actually doing these jobs alongside the hosts. They might explain their approach as we worked together, rather than giving a formal lesson. This direct involvement showed how much farming knowledge is learned through practice. My experience learning to turn compost at Veridian Farm, as detailed in this chapter's opening, where physical effort led to a practical understanding of the process, serves as a key example of this. While basic activities like composting or growing vegetables were common across many of the farms I visited, my participation revealed that the actual effort involved, the specific techniques and materials used, and the overall scale of these operations could vary significantly. Seeing and taking part in these different approaches was methodologically valuable, as it helped me understand the different ways farming practices could be carried out in diverse settings.

This immersive approach provided insight into the rhythms of farm life. Through this, I documented the physical and sensory aspects of sustainable farming as well as the interpersonal dynamics that developed during our hands worked the soil. Observing and participating in these

activities offered a deeper understanding of how ecological ideals are translated into practical actions, highlighting the interplay between individual efforts and collective processes. Additionally, participant observation offered opportunities to examine the broader dynamics of ecological engagement within the network, including the physical and mental demands associated with sustainable farming. Through this combination of observation and participation, I was able to contextualise the practices and relationships that underpin the WWOOF network.

Interviews and Informal Conversations

In addition to participant observation, this study used semi-structured interviews and informal conversations to explore the individual and relational dimensions of WWOOF participants' experiences. Both methods provided valuable insights that underlie WWOOF engagement.

Semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth discussions with both hosts and volunteers, capturing diverse experiences. Meanwhile, informal conversations, often occurring spontaneously during work or communal activities, offered real-time, unfiltered reflections that complemented the more structured insights gathered in interviews. This combined approach was crucial for deepening the understanding and creating a well-rounded view of the network's social and ecological dynamics.

The interview design aimed to explore participants' aspirations, expectations, and perceptions of their involvement in WWOOF, while leaving room for unexpected insights to emerge. This flexible format provided opportunities for participants to articulate their personal connections to the network, their observations on daily practices, and their broader reflections on ecological and social engagement. By encouraging open-ended discussions, the interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the diverse ways participants experienced and interpreted their roles.

To capture a nuanced range of perspectives on the dynamics of the WWOOF network, a series of sixteen formal semi-structured interviews were conducted. This selection deliberately sought diversity, encompassing both WWOOF hosts (representing different farm types, scales, and hosting philosophies) and WWOOF participants (including new and long-term WWOOFers with varied backgrounds, motivations, and levels of experience with ecological practices). While numerically defined, the true depth of this interview data emerges from its significant contextualization through extensive participant observation across six distinct sites and its enrichment by countless informal conversations. The aim was not merely to collect narratives, but to situate these formal interview accounts within the observed realities of daily life and the spontaneous dialogues that arose. This approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences that sustain the network's practices and interactions. By creating a conversational and trust-based environment during the semi-structured interviews, often building on rapport established through shared activities, participants were encouraged to express their thoughts freely, providing a robust foundation for understanding the network's practices and values from multiple, deeply considered viewpoints.

Additionally, informal conversations also formed an essential and continuous part of my data collection, occurring organically during daily farm activities and communal living. As a participant-volunteer, I shared tasks and household space with both hosts and other volunteers (including key individuals like Arthur, Marie, Nina, Rachel, and Sophie, with whom interactions were primarily of this nature), which naturally created opportunities for casual, unplanned discussions. The process of navigating my dual role and ensuring participants understood my research intentions during these organic interactions is detailed further in the 'Ethical Considerations' section. These interactions often took place during shared meals, work in the fields, or moments of rest, providing an invaluable informal complement to the structured approach of the semi-structured interviews. The informal nature of these exchanges encouraged

participants to share reflections and observations in a spontaneous and relaxed manner, offering insights that might not arise in formal interview settings. Conversations flowed naturally and covered a range of topics related to participants' roles and experiences within the WWOOF network. By engaging in these everyday dialogues, I was able to document reflections on the interpersonal and practical dynamics of farm life, including participants' perspectives on their contributions and relationships.

This method added significant richness to the data by capturing the subtleties of participants' lived experiences and interactions in their own words. The informal setting often put participants at ease, fostering open and candid exchanges that provided depth to the research. These conversations, alongside the formal interviews and participant observation, complemented the semi-structured interviews by offering a more holistic understanding of participants' experiences and how they navigated daily activities and relationships within the network. By integrating these diverse forms of verbal data collection with other ethnographic methods, the research captured a layered, deeply contextualized perspective on life within these ecological social networks.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis as a Key Tool in Capturing Experiences and Perspectives

To explore the rich narratives and varied experiences of both WWOOF participants and hosts, thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical tool. Thematic analysis is well-suited for capturing recurring patterns, ideas, and themes within qualitative data, making it an ideal choice for this study. Through thematic analysis, the research is able to organise and interpret data around core themes such as belonging, reciprocity, care, and sustainability. These themes align with the study's conceptual framework and provide a coherent structure for understanding the experiences and motivations of individuals within the WWOOF network.

Thematic analysis also offers the flexibility to identify both explicit themes (such as expressions of ecological commitment) and more implicit, nuanced themes (such as feelings of personal transformation or ethical responsibility). By focusing on themes that emerge from participants' own words and reflections, the study prioritizes participants' perspectives, ensuring that the analysis reflects their subjective experiences as closely as possible. This reflexive approach to data interpretation is vital in qualitative research, as it allows the researcher to remain attentive to the diverse and multifaceted experiences of participants. In synthesising qualitative studies on themes such as gardening and wellbeing, methodological reviews like York and Wiseman (2012) engage with diverse participant perspectives and interpretive complexities that inherently underscore the value of reflective analytical practice. For instance, in their review, they note the reflexive approach taken by Fieldhouse (2003) to minimize bias in his study of an allotment group. Reflexivity ensures a more accurate representation of participants' perspectives and allows for a dynamic and iterative engagement with the data, where preliminary interpretations can be revisited and refined in response to emerging insights.

This approach is particularly well-suited to exploring the multifaceted meanings and individual aspirations that participants bring to, and derive from, their engagement with WWOOF. Reflexivity further supports the exploration of how participants express these aspirations within different contexts, such as digital interactions and in-person experiences. Additionally, thematic analysis facilitates the complementarity of digital and in-person data, allowing insights from online interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic to enrich and be further illuminated by subsequent in-person fieldwork. This iterative and reflexive process ensures that the analysis remains grounded in participants' lived realities while addressing the complexities of their engagement.

Ethical Considerations

WWOOF and similar farm-volunteer schemes give hosts, travelling WWOOFers, and local volunteers a venue to act on shared ecological values while questioning industrial agriculture. Bunn (2014) reminds us that land, food, bodies, and labour anchor this resistance, so I treat ethics as the spine of my research design. Before each interview I summarise the project in plain language and record verbal consent. Former volunteers who are no longer on site are contacted only after a host confirms the approach is welcome; I then speak with them directly and reiterate that they can withdraw at any time without explanation.

Online material, especially YouTube vlogs add insight but raises its own challenges. Lee (2000) points out that public visibility does not equal free use; I therefore message each uploader, explain the study, and request permission to quote. If consent is unobtainable, I follow Townsend and Wallace's (2016) guideline that brief, contextual use of public-figure content is permissible when it poses no harm, while keeping Salganik's (2017) reminder in view: the harder consent is to secure, the greater the duty to minimise risk.

During fieldwork I worked alongside volunteers, shifting continually between participation and observation. That dual role required constant reflexivity, from watching for discomfort, pausing notes when conversation turned personal, and masking identifying details whenever disclosure could point to a single person or farm. Names or locations appear only when the individual or organisation is already public and has agreed to be identified.

As explained to participants during the consent process, all research participants and farms mentioned in this thesis are referred to by pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality. Pseudonyms have been applied consistently across interviews, fieldnotes, and ethnographic vignettes, with identifying details adjusted where necessary to safeguard anonymity without altering the substantive meaning of participants' experiences. The only exceptions are

references to publicly available materials, such as YouTube WWOOF vlogs and well-known community initiatives (for example, Incredible Edible in Todmorden), which are cited under their real names as they form part of the public domain. This distinction between anonymized fieldwork data and cited public sources was made clear to participants during the informed consent process.

Most importantly, my ethical stance rests on two commitments: to safeguard everyone who shared time and labour with me and to represent the wider moral economies of small-scale ecological volunteering with clarity and respect.

CHAPTER 5: BELONGING AND RELATEDNESS

"I don't need to travel. The world will come to me," One evening, as Grace and I prepared what she called "tea" (a term I learned to mean the main evening meal, as well as the hot drink), she spoke about her years as a WWOOF host.

Her words stayed with me, not just for what she said but for how they captured the quiet rhythm of life on her farm. Over the years, she has welcomed people from all over the world, each bringing their own stories, values, and ways of seeing the world. For Grace, hosting wasn't just about getting help on the farm, it was about the connections that formed over shared meals, simple routines, and the conversations that naturally unfolded.

As we worked, the theme music of The Archers, a nightly soap opera on BBC radio depicting contemporary rural life, played in the background, a presence as familiar in the room as the kettle on the stove. Grace listened with her eyes focusing on something distant, catching every word. The show's stories of rural life seemed to reflect her own experiences, maybe moments of resilience, of community, or perhaps the small struggles that come with farming and working with people. Later, when we were ready to sit down to eat, Grace spoke about the realities of hosting. Some volunteers came with boundless energy, others with dreams of a simpler life, but not all of them found what they were looking for. Farming, she said, has a way of showing people what they're made of. Hosting, too, was a learning experience, about meeting people where they were, about patience, and about finding common ground, even when it wasn't easy.

Belonging and Relatedness: An Introduction

Within the WWOOF network, participants often develop a profound sense of home in communities they have only just met. This feeling is composed of two intertwined concepts: belonging and relatedness. In my analysis, belonging is an active process, constructed through the daily practice of living and working alongside others. It is through this shared learning for a common cause that relatedness emerges. This concept addresses the web of connections between the people and land, that turn temporary roles into genuine relationships.

To understand how people become so deeply embedded in new environments, I return to a key theoretical lens established in the literature review: the theory of "situated learning" from Lave and Wenger (1991). As we have seen, they argue that learning is a social journey of becoming, which occurs through a process they term Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP). This concept, which describes the path a newcomer takes from the edge of a community to its core by engaging in authentic tasks is fundamental to the analysis in this chapter. It provides a framework for interpreting how a volunteer's initial, low-risk contributions can, through mutual recognition, evolve into a deeper sense of responsibility, competence, and ultimately, belonging.

At its heart, this theory reveals that acquiring knowledge and forming an identity are inseparable. A volunteer becomes competent by participating in meaningful practices, not by simply being taught. In this WWOOF context, therefore, belonging is never simply given; it is cultivated. It grows through direct engagement with the labours of farm life, such as digging in the soil, observing the host's techniques, asking questions, and eventually being trusted with new responsibilities. This process of moving from the periphery is contingent on mutual recognition. When a host acknowledges a volunteer's growing competence, perhaps by asking

them to lead a task, they affirm the volunteer's place and accelerate their integration into the community of practice.

Complementing this social framework, Tim Ingold's (2000) concept of "dwelling" offers insights into the embodied and sensory nature of this process. For Ingold, belonging is learned through our active and participatory engagement with a place. To dwell is to interact with an environment's very substance, its beats, and its practices. For WWOOF participants, connection is built through the daily tasks of tilling soil, observing plants, and tending animals. This work grounds their relatedness and makes a temporary space feel like home.

Ingold's (2000) distinction between "building" and "dwelling" is particularly useful here. While building implies a design imposed from above, dwelling is a process of learning through being in the world, moving with it and responding to it. This philosophy was vividly articulated during my time with Daniel at Veridian Farm, who explained, "you don't plan the garden and then fill it in, you live with it, and see what it needs." His approach was evident in the way volunteers learned to adapt their work to the land's own terms. They became attuned to the routines of the farm and to the subtle cues of the soil itself. Over time, this developed into an understanding that went beyond practical demands and into the farm's affective rhythms, such as sensing the readiness of the compost and feeling when the animals were unsettled. This is what Ingold (2000) calls an "education of attention" (pp. 21–22), a notion he develops in his account of enskilment and dwelling (pp. 37, 415–416; see also Gibson, 1979). Working alongside volunteers at Veridian Farm made this process of dwelling tangible to me in ways that were neither immediate nor verbal. When I first began digging beds, the soil resisted in ways I had not anticipated: after rain it clung heavily to the spade, each lift requiring more effort than expected, while on drier days the ground compacted and demanded repeated pressure before yielding. My pace was initially out of sync with others', and my body tired

quickly. Learning did not come through instruction so much as through adjustment: noticing how others angled their tools, when they paused, or how they altered tasks in response to weather conditions. Rain could halt work altogether, while the risk of frost shaped decisions about when seedlings could be planted out. Over time, these bodily negotiations with soil, tools, and weather became familiar, and it was through this gradual attunement that the farm began to feel less like an unfamiliar workplace and more like a place I was learning to inhabit. Belonging, in this sense, emerged through embodied engagement with the land's rhythms and constraints (Ingold 2007; 2010).

Dwelling, then, is fundamentally a way of relating to a place. It is this process of forging relations that I examine in this chapter. I explore how temporary volunteer roles can deepen into forms of fictive kinship through the affective bonds and shared rituals of daily farm life. Looking at cases like Veridian Farm reveals how hosts and volunteers connect through informal exchanges and everyday routines, cultivating a layered experience of relatedness. The small practices such as participating in communal meals, exchanging food, and engaging in daily tasks become rites of togetherness that can make a farm feel like both a workplace and a home. Of course, this sense of belonging is never guaranteed. It often depends on the delicate and uneven dynamics of hospitality, requiring mutual recognition and an understanding of unspoken social cues. For this, I will show how these multiple layers of relation are forged, revealing that even short-term engagements can create powerful and long-lasting bonds.

Case Study: Sophie, Rachel, and the Garden Ninjas

My early experiences working alongside Sophie and Rachel foregrounded how participation in the farm unfolded through shared bodily labour before it was articulated socially. Tasks such as clearing nettles, harvesting apples, or preparing beds were repetitive and physically demanding, requiring attention to posture, rhythm, and timing. I learned when to slow down,

when to exert more force, and how to coordinate my movements with others working nearby. Much of this learning occurred through watching and copying, complemented by brief instructions as tasks were delegated and coordinated to keep the work manageable. Sophie's ease with these tasks contrasted with my own initial uncertainty, yet it was precisely this shared exposure to fatigue, weather, and routine that created a sense of collective effort. Belonging began to take shape through these moments of shared labour, where competence was demonstrated practically and recognition emerged gradually, grounded in the material demands of the farm rather than in conversation or formal instruction. Through working alongside others, the wider social organisation of Veridian Farm came into view.

At Veridian Farm, a small, family-run apple orchard and organic garden, hosts Daniel and Beatrice foster an inclusive environment, reflected in the playful nickname they give their volunteers: 'garden ninjas.' This moniker creates a sense of light-hearted camaraderie that welcomes everyone not merely as a worker, but as a person who contributes to the shared life of the farm. Through daily tasks and occasional gatherings, relationships are built and volunteers are woven into the farm's routines. While the farm cultivates a strong sense of community and mutual care, this is always balanced by the structural realities of labour exchange and the differing expectations of those involved.

Sophie and Rachel are volunteers who come to Veridian Farm to help. Sophie's story exemplifies the transition from peripheral participation to full community integration. Born in York, her passion for sustainable agriculture was sparked during her time WWOOFing across Southeast Asia. She was first attracted to the exchange by the affordability, but soon fell in love with the principles of organic farming. Reflecting on that formative time in an organic tropical fruit orchard, she noted the value of staying long enough to become truly immersed: "You only get to experience so much by staying for an extended period. I got to see local

festivals and beautiful scenery that short-term visitors miss. Honestly, I was probably the healthiest I've ever been in my life.”

Back home she was inspired to learn more and started her journey at Veridian Farm doing basic tasks under the guidance of Daniel, Beatrice and experienced volunteers. As her skills and confidence grew, her responsibilities slowly increased until she is now garden manager. Her progression follows Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory, where participation is active and leads to a shift from peripheral to central roles in a community of practice. When asked what it took to succeed in such an environment, she emphasised the importance of a flexible mindset: "I think what makes a volunteer successful here is a willingness to be open. You have to be ready to change and to really listen to feedbacks from your peers." One such milestone was the building of Sophie’s own hut: a small, humble space built by Daniel, Beatrice, and other community members. Her growing place within the farm’s daily life was symbolized by this collective act: she was becoming a key figure at Veridian Farm. The transformation from a simple volunteer into a central member of the community was not simply a matter of time spent, but of trust earned and responsibilities gradually assumed.

One such moment of recognition came unexpectedly during a non-volunteering day, when I returned to the farm to retrieve a water bottle I had forgotten. The previous day had been filled with physical tasks including clearing nettles, harvesting apples, and at the time I had only vaguely noticed Sophie walking around with a notebook, measuring the beds. I hadn’t paid much attention, caught up in my own work. But when I returned the next day, I found her sitting at a table with her laptop open, absorbed in entering data. Curious, I asked what she was doing. “I’m keying in all the bed dimensions,” she said. “We’ve just started using this new software, which helps with planning the crop layout for the next cycle. Once I put in the sizes of all the beds, it can generate suggestions for what to plant where, and when.” She laughed

and added, “It feels like I’m back in school, to be honest. I never thought I’d be doing this kind of computer stuff here. But it’s part of the job now.” What struck me was how naturally she seemed to take it in stride. The task might have looked simple, but it showed how much her role had grown, not just in what she did, but in how much she was trusted to do.

In another story, Rachel’s journey with Veridian Farm shows the dynamic between communal learning and personal application in sustainable agriculture. Rachel’s involvement is more fluid than Sophie’s. She came to Veridian Farm already familiar with the WWOOF network, but was still new to the rhythms of sustainable farming. Rachel found that the farm offered an environment where she could dive into the foundational work, recalling how “The work was foundational. I learned so much from digging and planting, from harvesting ripe berries to picking apples from the trees.” These experiences refined her skills and inspired her and a friend to acquire their own allotment nearby, and soon after, a second one. Her excitement about this new venture was palpable: “It’s just so exciting to finally see the beginnings of our own project. We have this amazing piece of land now, and the thought of turning it into our own vegetable garden... it makes all the learning feel real.” Rachel’s growing independence is balanced by her continued participation in Veridian Farm as a ‘garden ninja,’ showing how participation in ecological practices can influence personal projects and support a broader ecological mindset, even without full immersion in the farm’s social world.

Though volunteers at Veridian Farm only contribute two days per week, social connections still form organically there. The environment encourages natural relationships, enhancing their experience. Sophie’s progression from an inexperienced volunteer to a key member of the farm’s operations illustrates how relationships are built through shared work and a collective sense of purpose. Similarly, Rachel’s ongoing connection to the farm, even as she balances work on her own allotments, highlights the enduring ties that can form between volunteers and

the community. These trajectories are not the same as Sophie's centrality to the farm is recognised and enacted through responsibilities and trust, while Rachel's looser form of belonging emerges through ongoing spirit of inquiry. Daniel and Beatrice were observed actively fostering these social bonds through a straightforward yet impactful approach. For instance, they establish WhatsApp groups to facilitate communication among the volunteers. These groups are invaluable for organizing daily tasks and sharing updates, but they also serve as spaces where volunteers can arrange casual meet-ups and offer encouragement to one another. Social activities like potluck dinners, river swims, and art sessions further strengthen the sense of togetherness, offering volunteers a reprieve from the physical demands of farm work while providing opportunities to bond over shared experiences. More than just recreational, these gatherings are intentional acts of community-building that foster trust and camaraderie.

Alongside these organised forms of social connection, everyday routines also played an important role. These shared meals did not stand apart from the work of the day, but followed directly from it. After hours spent outdoors, bodies were tired, clothes marked by soil and weather, and movements slowed. Moving from the fields into the kitchen involved a subtle shift rather than a clear break: washing hands, changing boots, gathering around food prepared from the same land we had worked on. The ease of conversation that emerged at the table was shaped by this prior co-presence in labour, where effort and fatigue were already mutually recognised. In this way, commensality functioned less as the origin of belonging than as its continuation, extending the shared rhythms of work into moments of rest and nourishment.

Commensality, the act of eating together, stands out as a particularly meaningful practice for forging connection at Veridian Farm. On every volunteering day, hosts and volunteers gather to prepare and share meals, often featuring farm-fresh produce or homemade dishes prepared

beforehand. My observations revealed the warmth and humour that characterized these gatherings, where eating together becomes a natural extension of the farm's collaborative ethos. Discussions around the table are lively, moving easily from techniques for growing seasonal crops to tips for managing home allotments. Volunteers might swap stories of past travels, talk about dietary preferences, or share recipes, while others chat about plans for a roller-skating session or an upcoming hike. In these moments, the exchange of practical knowledge becomes inseparable from the building of friendships, reinforcing the relational bonds that hold the community together.

The varied pathways to belonging are best illustrated by contrasting the experiences of Sophie and Rachel. Sophie's transformation was a gradual process of deep integration. Her initial role as a novice volunteer expanded over time as she built trust, honed her practical expertise, and strengthened her personal relationships, ultimately taking on responsibilities that made her a vital part of the farm's daily life. Rachel's journey, on the other hand, reflects a more flexible engagement. While her participation is less central, her continued involvement alongside the application of her learning to her own allotment highlights the farm's ability to nurture relationships that transcend its physical boundaries. Their combined stories reveal that within such collective learning environments, belonging is not a single, guaranteed outcome. It is a complicated and multifaceted experience, tied to the rhythms of farm life and the capacity of individuals to find their own way of fitting into the community's expectations.

Relatedness and Belonging: Fictive Kinship and Emotional Bonds

Interest in consuming healthy, sustainably grown food often leads individuals to explore how their food is produced, drawing them into networks like WWOOF. This curiosity and growing awareness about food systems can lead to a deeper engagement with organic and sustainable practices, as working on an organic farm offers a practical way to align eating habits and

personal values with environmentally mindful actions. While volunteers join for a variety of reasons, their shared interest in learning about natural farming methods creates a common ground that shapes their interactions and helps build a sense of community.

At farms like Veridian Farm, these initial shared interests often grow into something more meaningful. Volunteers and hosts connect through their work and the relationships built during everyday activities. These bonds develop into family-like ties, based on mutual respect and shared personal experiences. Anthropologists often describe these relationships as “fictive kinship,” where connections, though not based on biological ties, carry the warmth and trust of family. It is the development of these relationships, rooted in shared experiences and mutual care, that this section examines.

While the language of fictive kinship captures the emotional texture of these relationships, it does not fully account for their intermittent and temporary character within WWOOF settings. To address this, I introduce the concept of *episodic relatedness*. This concept emerges from my own linguistic and cultural understanding of social relations, particularly the Malay expression *hubungan yang kadang-kadang terjadi* (relationships that occur from time to time) or *hubungan berkala* (often translated as “periodic” relationships). Such relations are characterised by presence that is intermittent rather than continuous: *kadang ada, kadang tiada* (sometimes present, sometimes absent), but nonetheless meaningful when they occur. These are relationships that come into being when needed, through particular situations, shared activities, or moments of co-presence, rather than through long-term obligation or permanence. While *berkala* might be translated as “periodic,” I avoid this term because it suggests a regular, technical rhythm. Instead, I use *episodic* to emphasise that such relations do not follow a uniform template. Like episodes in a serial drama, each encounter unfolds with its own dynamics, tensions, and forms of intimacy, shaped by context rather than repetition. This

framing helps make sense of the kinds of relatedness that emerged within WWOOF settings, where belonging was often produced through short, intense periods of shared labour, learning, and care, even when relationships remained temporary, uneven, or discontinuous. The term *episodic relatedness* has also been used by Søndergaard et al. (2022) in their analysis of families living with socioeconomic disadvantage and multimorbidity, where it describes fragile and discontinuous forms of social connection that challenge institutional assumptions of stable support networks. In their work, episodic relatedness is treated primarily as a condition of precarity, signalling the difficulty of sustaining continuity over time. While my use of the term resonates with their emphasis on temporality and interruption, I depart from their framing by approaching *episodic relatedness* not as a deficit, but as a situated and sometimes generative mode of sociality. In the context of WWOOF, *episodic relatedness* helps make sense of how temporary, uneven, and non-permanent relations can nonetheless produce belonging, care, and meaningful collaboration, even when they do not solidify into long-term ties.

Beyond kinship, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of symbolic capital is useful for understanding their underlying economy and how social value is generated and managed within WWOOF households. In these settings, hospitality and care are part of a relational economy. Recognition, trust, and ethical identity contribute to a household's symbolic standing. Hosts often extend invitations to volunteers through discourses of shared values and mutual learning, cultivating a sense of open, ethical community. Yet this openness is not without limits. As Bourdieu also suggests, households may strategically adjust or withdraw these social ties in response to material conditions. During slower seasons or moments of resource scarcity, hosts may limit the number of volunteers or scale back their social availability. This isn't a sign of failure. Instead it reflects how domestic ecologies are shaped by both symbolic and material constraints, balancing the desire to be generous with the need to sustain the household.

At Valley Organic, hosts Morgan and Lana articulate a vision of community that encompasses both people and the environment. During a lunch conversation, Lana reflected on how she and Morgan perceive community as “being part of something bigger than yourself.” For her, belonging involves both relationships among individuals and a commitment to the land and its well-being. As a former teacher, she described the community as a space where shared goals and collective efforts create purpose and connection, emphasizing that the environment deserves the same care and respect as the people within it. Morgan, with his deep passion for farming and permaculture, added that this perspective shapes their approach to the farm, influencing both how they work the soil and how they engage with volunteers. This holistic understanding resonates with volunteers, who find their experiences on the farm enriched by a sense of interdependence that blends ecological stewardship with personal connection.

These connections extend beyond the farm to the broader local community, including collaborations with groups like the local mosque. On one occasion, while attending Friday prayers, I met members of the mosque community who spoke warmly about their relationship with the farm. They highlighted how the farm’s produce and resources had supported local events and initiatives, such as providing fresh vegetables for community meals and participating in efforts to encourage urban gardening in Todmorden. These initiatives align with the ethos of the Incredible Edible (IE) movement, a similar grassroots project in Todmorden that promotes food security and environmental sustainability through public planting and local collaboration. Valley Organic’s involvement with IE demonstrates its role as both a local hub for ecological practices and a bridge connecting diverse communities. The farm contributes both practically and symbolically, fostering a shared sense of responsibility for healthy and accessible food.



Figure 12: Organic Vegetable and Flower Plots at Todmorden Train Station, Initiatives by

IE

The approach of Morgan and Lana exemplifies the unique relationships that form on WWOOF farms. At Valley Organic, bonds grow naturally through shared tasks, meals, and moments of reflection. Volunteers often feel they are joining a family-like network, one that bridges their diverse backgrounds and motivations. These connections extend beyond the farm, strengthened by ties to the surrounding community and local initiatives like the Incredible Edible movement in Todmorden. Through these collaborations, the farm creates a sense of belonging that enriches daily life. These relationships can then transcend divides of culture, social background, and religion.

This sense of belonging often evolves into relationships resembling familial bonds, shaped by the intimate dynamics of shared labour and daily life. One vivid example of this is captured in Alessandra's YouTube vlogs, where she documents her time volunteering on a WWOOF farm

in Italy. Her vlogs offer a visual narrative that captures how her relationship with the host grew as they worked side by side. In one candid moment, she refers to her host as “Dad,” showcasing a bond built on trust and humour. Her host, in turn, playfully critiques her depiction of farm life. He urges her to portray its challenges alongside its charm. Alessandra’s choice to use familial language reflects a deeper sense of connection and acceptance within the WWOOF exchange, illustrating how trust and familiarity can transform volunteer-host dynamics into something akin to kinship. As she remarks in her vlog:

“Today we are planting all day so I thought I would show you guys this planting because our host dad saw my last video and said that I’ve glorified this experience too much... so I need to show the real truth about what we do on a daily basis so let’s go!”

The teasing and humour in Alessandra’s vlogs illustrate how volunteers and hosts often navigate the blurred boundaries between guest, worker, and kin through what anthropology terms ‘joking relationships’ (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). In kinship theory, such relationships offer a structured space for managing potentially tense or ambivalent roles by allowing for playfulness and critique. In the WWOOF context, volunteers may perform repetitive, unpaid tasks while simultaneously being welcomed as ‘family’: a contradiction that joking can help mediate. These light-hearted interactions, like being called ‘Dad’ or making fun of over-romanticised portrayals of farm life, act as subtle ways of acknowledging the unevenness of the relationship without confronting it directly. Storytelling, as Hou (2023) observes, fosters community cohesion by aligning personal narratives with collective experiences, while Taylor and Weir (2020) emphasise the role of humour in creating a supportive atmosphere that strengthens interpersonal bonds.

This reflects a broader trend across WWOOF farms, where relational bonds emerge naturally from shared labour, humour, and trust. Rather than just assigning roles, hosts like Morgan and Lana cultivate an environment where volunteers feel valued as part of a shared enterprise. Emphasizing relational practices, these sites demonstrate how everyday interactions nurture fictive kinship. Consequently, the farm becomes a space where volunteers connect not just as colleagues, but as members of a broader familial network.

This flexibility in relationships is crucial to the sense of belonging that emerges on farms. Unlike structured identities in formal organisations or social movements, the relationships among participants are adaptive, shaped by the individual histories and intentions that each person brings. These connections are dynamic, anchored in shared experiences but open to the individual ways in which each volunteer relates to the farm, the hosts, and each other. Volunteers are not required to adopt a specific identity, nor do they need to have identical motivations; instead, they bring their unique stories into the community. For instance, Yuki's aspirations stemmed from her background in a climate activism course, leading her to approach WWOOF as a way to gain practical, hands-on skills in ecological agriculture from experienced practitioners. Isabel, originally from Guatemala, sought out local volunteering to reconnect with nearby land-based routines after being trapped in her own house due to lockdown. Both of their fuller narratives will be explored in the next chapter, but their brief appearances here highlight the diversity of identities that these farms accommodate. This diversity aligns with the concept of communities of practice as articulated by Lave and Wenger, where learning and identity co-develop through participation in communal activities.

Shared Meals as Part of Belonging

Shared meals are a central aspect of life on these farms, offering a space where volunteers and hosts come together to eat, share stories, and reflect on their day. These gatherings are informal

yet deeply meaningful, blending nourishment with the relational bonds that develop through communal living and work. Meals often offer a rare pause in the farm schedule. They shift the focus from productivity and tasks towards presence and togetherness.

At The Bridge Institute, the preparation of meals follows a rotating duty system. Every few days, two volunteers are assigned as cooks for the day, covering breakfast, lunch, and dinner. These cooks come from a mix of programmes: WWOOFers, and other international volunteers who take turns managing the kitchen (see Appendix D, Figure 4 & 5). The morning shift begins as early as 6:30 a.m., with breakfast served between 8:00 and 9:00 for up to 20-25 people. Lunch is usually served at 1:00 p.m., and dinner at 6:00 p.m., with prep beginning around 11:30 and 4:30. For many, especially first-time volunteers, this can be an intimidating task. Some admitted to me that it was their first time cooking for such a large group. Yet The Bridge Institute philosophy embraces this learning curve: “It doesn’t have to be delicious, just make with love,” one instructor told me. This attitude hints a culture of acceptance and mutual support.

Cooking thus becomes part of the teaching and learning process, where volunteers learn practical culinary skills. They also gain patience, resilience, and learn to care for others, especially when adapting to unfamiliar recipes or dietary needs like halal or vegetarian food. This duty also embeds them into the broader community infrastructure: while some are off in fields, others engage in recycling, language classes, or preparation for international placements. Food links these multiple trajectories.

One such connection emerged during my time at Valley Organic. After a long day of lifting roof sheets for a new barn, we gathered in the kitchen. Declan, a fellow volunteer, looked at me with a grin and asked, “What would you have for tea?” I proudly held up my bag of Malaysian black coffee, savouring its familiar taste. I didn’t need any tea, misunderstanding

his British slang for dinner³. His hearty laugh quickly revealed my mistake, and I joked, “I didn’t learn that in Malaysian school,” which only made him laugh harder. To bridge the gap, Declan offered to cook fajitas, a dish completely unfamiliar to me. That meal became more than just dinner. It was a moment of humour and cultural exchange, turning an ordinary evening into an opportunity to connect through difference.

At Valley Organic, only lunch was regularly provided. Morgan, the host, usually prepared it using the day's harvest. Breakfast and dinner were self-prepared by WWOOFers using ingredients available in the communal hut kitchen. Declan and I would alternate cooking dinner. Some nights it was Thai food, other nights English comfort meals. Sharing recipes was a common activity during our six weeks volunteering, bringing together food and cross-cultural creativity. The hut was a simple but sufficient space, stocked with bread, oils, seasonal vegetables, and dry goods, enough to enable volunteers to improvise.

Such moments are often observed on WWOOF farms, where meals serve as key opportunities for building relationships. While many volunteers are initially drawn to WWOOF for its focus on sustainable food and organic farming, these gatherings extend those connections in less tangible ways. At Veridian Farm, for instance, Daniel and Beatrice invite volunteers to share dishes prepared with ingredients grown on the farm. However, many of the volunteers here are daily visitors, comprising of locals who come to work for the day and return home in the evening. During lunch breaks, they often bring their own food and generously share it. One day a thermos of Guatemalan stew appeared; another day, vegan sushi rolls. This unstructured form of food sharing stood in contrast to the scheduled meals at The Bridge Institute or Valley Organic, but it was no less meaningful. It reflected a looser, more flexible ethos of contribution, where food became a quiet act of reciprocity and care.

³ In many northern regions of the UK, lunch is called dinner, and dinner is referred to as tea.



Figure 13: Garden Ninjas Unite Over a Lunch Meal at Veridian Farm

Across several WWOOF sites, communal meals functioned as daily routines and as symbolic acts that fostered a sense of unity amidst diversity. This brought to mind Geertz's (1973) notion of the slametan in Javanese society: a ritual meal that affirms harmony in the absence of consensus. Like the slametan, these WWOOF meals brought together people with differing motivations: some interested in permaculture, others in climate action, cultural exchange, or life transitions. The act of eating together allowed these differences to coexist without needing full agreement. At The Bridge Institute, for example, these moments were especially pronounced: meals brought together WWOOFers, and staff in ways that blurred programme lines and roles. Yet, unlike the slametan's scripted ritual, WWOOF meals: whether at The Bridge Institute, Valley Organic, or Veridian Farm were improvised and adaptive. None of these meals were ceremonial in the way the slametan is. Conversations were spontaneous;

seating and participation fluid; humour, silence, or reflection emerged organically. The slametan comparison is not about equivalence, but about relational function, examining how food practices create cohesion despite difference, even in the most modest or improvised forms.

Even small actions, like deciding who would clean up after meals, highlighted cultural differences and sparked informal debates. One evening at The Bridge Institute, Mia, one of the more vocal and humorous volunteers, stood up and made a playful announcement, “Just a reminder, folks. Please rinse the soap off the plates. Someone’s been leaving bubbles behind, and I don’t want to taste Fairy Liquid with my lentils.” Laughter rippled through the group, followed by a cascade of banter. “In the UK, rinsing is optional.”

Though light-hearted on the surface, this spontaneous exchange was not trivial. It marked a subtle point of friction in which shared domestic routines exposed underlying cultural assumptions and tensions around hygiene, care, and responsibility.

At the time, I didn’t immediately register this dishwashing moment as anthropologically significant. But when Arthur at Oakhaven cheerfully told me, “I’ll teach you how the English wash dishes,” something clicked. His comment reframed what I had encountered across earlier sites, making me realize that cleaning up after communal meals was not just a practical matter, but a layered cultural and ethical practice. It became a lens through which differences in cleanliness, ecological values, and cultural upbringing were negotiated in everyday life. Suddenly, this minor task felt ethnographically rich: a practice that revealed how care, reciprocity, and sustainability were interpreted differently across sites.

Valley Organic offered a unique model: Matt, the host, taught Declan and me how they managed dishwashing collectively by allowing dirty plates to accumulate across two or three days, before assigning someone to do a full wash-up. It was a routine they had developed, where the priority was water conservation and maintaining ecological awareness without being

overly fastidious. At The Green Plot, a similar consciousness about water and chemical use shaped practices around cleaning, but rinsing was considered essential. The host here, Grace, insisted on using eco-friendly washing-up liquids and ensured that volunteers understood why soap residue needed to be properly washed off. I remember bringing my own Malaysian coffee to Grace's, and after making it, I had to pay close attention during clean-up, not just to rinsing the cup properly, but to ensuring the coffee waste didn't end up in the organic bin, which was strictly reserved for farm-generated food scraps destined for compost. These practices were not framed as mere chores, but as part of the farm's broader ecological ethic.

Likewise, at Oakhaven, Arthur and Julie made organic washing liquid available for volunteers and reminded them that clean-up routines should not leave residues on shared dishes. These small routines, often overlooked, became important spaces where volunteers learned how sustainability was enacted in growing food as well as in how that food, and the labour around it, was cared for. In each site, the act of washing dishes invoked not only hygiene, but also notions of environmental responsibility, efficiency, and mutual respect. What might seem like a mundane domestic act revealed divergent assumptions about cleanliness, risk, and care, shaped by habit, ecology, and social learning.

These subtle, embodied differences in cleaning routines complemented and sometimes complicated the ethos of communal eating. While meals created a shared space for storytelling and conviviality, the clean-up afterwards exposed the material and moral labour that sustains such spaces. Rather than seeing these dishwashing differences as failures of coordination, I came to understand them as micro-negotiations within temporary, diverse communities. These negotiations revealed how values such as care and sustainability are contested, while also showing how reciprocity is continuously improvised, discussed, and even joked about.

Of course, shared meals are not always easy or universally valued. Some volunteers drifted in and out of the communal rhythms, preferring to eat alone or outside the kitchen space. At The Bridge Institute, Elias, who we will revisit in Chapter 7, often took his food and ate apart from the group, despite his central role in garden work. Others found the expectations around participation or cleanup unclear, leading to quiet tensions. These inconsistencies do not diminish the value of communal eating, but rather highlight how it must be continually negotiated within a diverse, temporary community.

Veen's research further highlights how meal sharing with strangers fosters community values and reciprocity, emphasizing its social role (Veen, 2019). In these settings, such practices often anchor daily life and become spaces for informal learning, storytelling, and exchange. Holstein's study on community gardens similarly reveals how growing and sharing food deepens one's sense of place and reflects relational dynamics within a group (Holstein, 2017). In these ecological volunteer settings, meals are not just nourishment but moments where roles, values, and belonging are brought into the open, sometimes reinforced, sometimes renegotiated. These meals demonstrate the community's ecological and ethical values. While sometimes flexible and imperfect, they are instrumental in building and sustaining social connections. Across these sites, eating together is shaped by different rhythms: structured rotations at The Bridge Institute, casual co-cooking at Valley Organic, and spontaneous lunch sharing at Veridian Farm. These variations don't reflect a hierarchy of value but a spectrum of practices shaped by context. Rather than assuming communal meals are always transformative, this diversity shows how food-sharing creates flexible spaces of encounter: sometimes reflective, sometimes routine, but always entangled with the broader ethos of care and coexistence. Meals ultimately become mediums where individual and collective experiences overlap, offering glimpses into how community is built, practiced, and sustained.

Digital Expressions of Belonging

If shared meals provided a sensory and co-present mode of cultivating relatedness, digital connection within WWOOF reveals a parallel but distinct terrain for sustaining belonging. These connections are no less relational for being mediated. Indeed, WWOOF's evolving digital landscape reflects how its members negotiate their relationships. It is a space where they build social intimacy and engage in ethical reflection. This process allows for an alignment of values to be negotiated through labour and presence. Crucially, it also occurs across various digital tools. These include online platforms, personal profiles, and direct messaging, with vlogging emerging as an increasingly prevalent medium.

Rather than being a replacement for face-to-face connection, digital media in WWOOF contexts operates as a complement to embodied participation, often preparing individuals for their encounter with unfamiliar settings and social norms. Volunteers engage with these platforms in several ways before they travel. They read host profiles and scrutinize peer reviews. Many watch YouTube vlogs or initiate contact with hosts through direct messaging. These online engagements offer a means of navigating affective expectation and moral imagination even before arrival. As several vloggers in the analysed dataset emphasised, this pre-departure digital interaction is crucial. One WWOOFer, reflecting on her positive experience in Denmark which she selected after careful online research, strongly advised future volunteers to "really pay attention a lot to the reviews left on the farms... I looked at their reviews [for Denmark] not one single complaint not one bad thing left on any of the farms and I was like okay that's it I'm going to Denmark". Another vlogger who WWOOFed in Switzerland recommended, "it's often really good to FaceTime or Skype with them [hosts] just so you can get a feel of what like their energy is like... better than emailing" because email responses might only offer "professional answers". This highlights how digital tools facilitate

a form of "relational improvisation" and vetting even before physical presence, allowing WWOOFers to seek out compatible environments. While meals and bodily routines immerse participants in the immediacy of shared rhythms on the farm, this prior digital engagement fosters a kind of anticipatory attunement. Through this, volunteers begin to locate themselves within a translocal ecology built on shared WWOOFing stories and practical examples, which helps them connect with the movement's core value orientations.

WWOOF's digital presence, however, did not begin with the pandemic, although its role was undoubtedly amplified. Over the past two decades, online tools have played an increasing role in how WWOOF connects volunteers with hosts. As longtime host Grace explained, the internet has progressively transformed the movement's reach and accessibility:

"There's been a big change in the last, let's say, 10 or 15 years... I've been here for 30 years now as a WWOOF host, and in the beginning, I would get very few requests... Then, it really took off some years ago with the internet, more people had heard of WWOOF, and people were using it for their travels. The internet has allowed hosts and WWOOFers to find each other so easily, and even now, when we can't be together in person, we can still communicate and share updates."

Grace's reflection underscores the pivotal role that digital platforms have played in expanding WWOOF's accessibility. By bridging geographical and informational gaps, the internet has enabled a broader pool of participants to engage, transforming WWOOF from a relatively niche network into a more globally recognized movement. Online directories and national websites have become key tools, allowing both hosts and volunteers to navigate the logistics of connection with greater ease. This accessibility also supports the alignment of values, as online profiles, along with peer-generated reviews and vlogs, allow participants to seek out like-minded communities and experiences. While Grace highlights the practical ease, her

observations also point to the creation of a more interconnected and resilient network that can sustain forms of belonging even during periods of physical separation.

As longtime host Grace observed, digital platforms have progressively transformed the WWOOF network's reach over the past two decades. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, appears to have accelerated this trend, amplifying the role of these platforms not just for recruitment, but as vital arenas for sustaining community during a period of profound disruption. This shift is quantitatively visible in the production of user-generated content. An analysis of YouTube videos related to "WWOOF" and "exchange," gathered via the Google search method detailed in Chapter 4, reveals a distinct spike in uploads coinciding with the pandemic's peak. While the pre-pandemic period saw a steady number of uploads (approximately 45 videos from 2015-2016 and 76 from 2017-2018), this figure rose dramatically to 132 videos during the 2019-2020 period. This spike, visually represented in Figure 15, suggests a significant acceleration of digital engagement within the WWOOF community during this time.

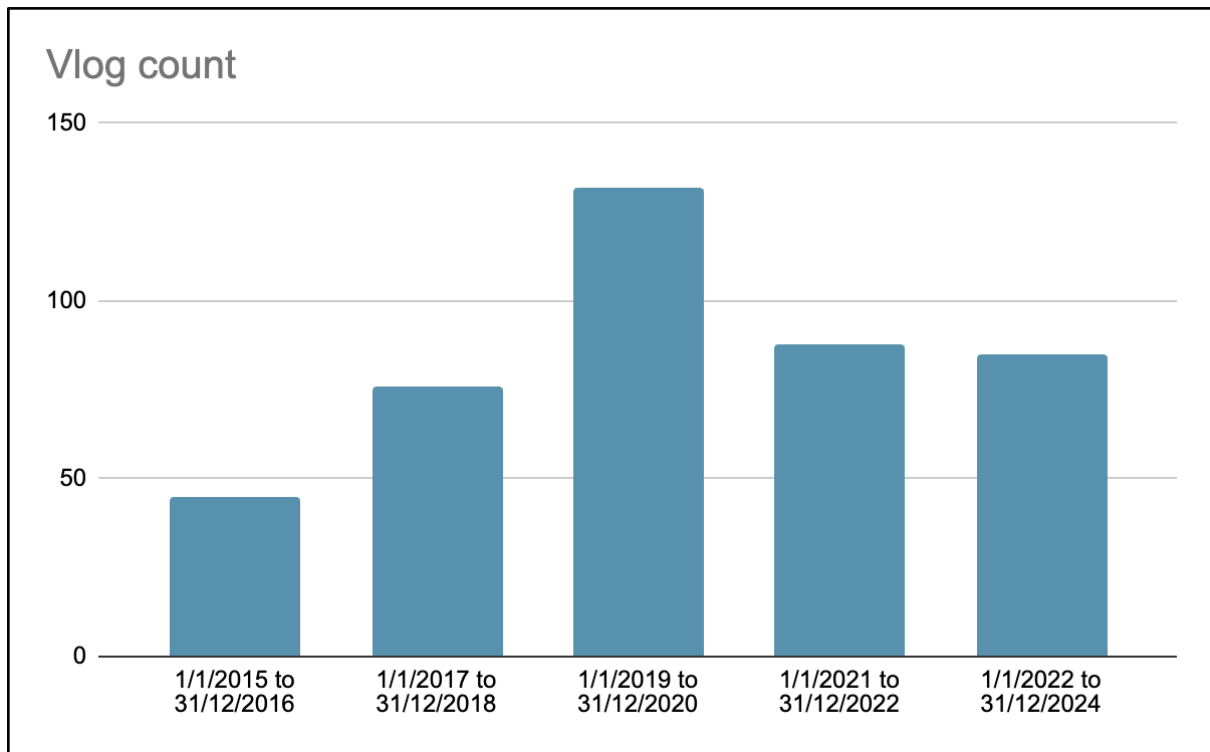


Figure 14: WWOOF-Related YouTube Vlog Uploads by Period (2015-2024) ⁴

This trend suggests that as physical mobility was curtailed, digital spaces became critical infrastructures for what could be termed digital resilience. This aligns with scholarship on the role of social media during crises, which notes the capacity of digital platforms to facilitate peer support, knowledge exchange, and social cohesion when physical interaction is limited (Mehan and Mostafavi, 2022). For the WWOOF community, these vlogs did more than just document experiences; they fostered a sense of networked belonging, allowing participants to connect over shared values and navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic collectively. However, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of this digital connection. As Grace also noted in her interview, and as Aare et al. (2020) argue in their work on peer-to-peer learning,

⁴ This bar chart illustrates the number of WWOOF-related videos uploaded to YouTube, grouped in two-year intervals from the beginning of 2015 to the end of 2024. The data was gathered using the Google search method outlined in the methodology (Chapter 4). The chart highlights a distinct spike in user-generated content during the 2019-2020 period, coinciding with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

such platforms are best seen as a complement to, not a replacement for, the rich, embodied, and sensory connections fostered through co-present life on a farm.

To understand these digital expressions of belonging more deeply, this research undertook an in-depth ethnographic analysis of approximately 34 unique WWOOF-related YouTube vlogs. The foundation of this exploration was a comprehensive method that integrated a careful examination of both the visual and auditory dimensions of the original video content. This dual process allowed for a nuanced interpretation of a vlogger's spoken experiences, which was analysed alongside their visual storytelling. Specific presentational choices were also considered, including their approach to editing, their use of music, and any on-screen text.

Each vlog was examined to discern its creator's overt purpose. This purpose could be to inform, to document a personal journey, to offer advice, or to provide a critique of their experience. The emotional tone was another key focus, analysed through the vlogger's use of language, their intonation, and their body language. Finally, the overall visual composition and the narrative arc of the WWOOFing experience were also taken into account.

This methodological approach reveals a multifaceted window into the diverse realities of WWOOFing, predominantly from the volunteers' own perspectives. It spans a wide array of geographical settings and motivations. These ranged from the pragmatic pursuit of budget travel to profound quests for learning and a sense of connection, or even for personal transformation, as exemplified by the WWOOFer who found a "magical beautiful energy" on a US farm. A complementary perspective is offered by a Californian host, whose vlog emphasises a desire to nurture WWOOFers' growth and facilitate their "greatest expression".

To visually encapsulate the diverse narrative forms and thematic preoccupations identified within this analysed vlog dataset, a diagrammatic representation of WWOOF-related vlog typologies has been developed (see Figure 15). This diagram categorizes the vlogs based on

their primary communicative intent and recurring content themes. It is important to note that this typological framework and the associated thematic elements are presented to illustrate the qualitative richness and diversity within this specific dataset. They are not intended to represent a statistical analysis of the prevalence or exact proportion of these themes across all WWOOF-related vlogs. Rather, this categorization serves as an analytical tool to understand the patterns of expression and the range of perspectives present, providing clues to the multifaceted ways in which belonging and relatedness are digitally constructed and negotiated within the WWOOF community. The aim is to provide insight into the how and what of these digital expressions, rather than a quantitative measurement of 'how much' each type or theme appears globally.

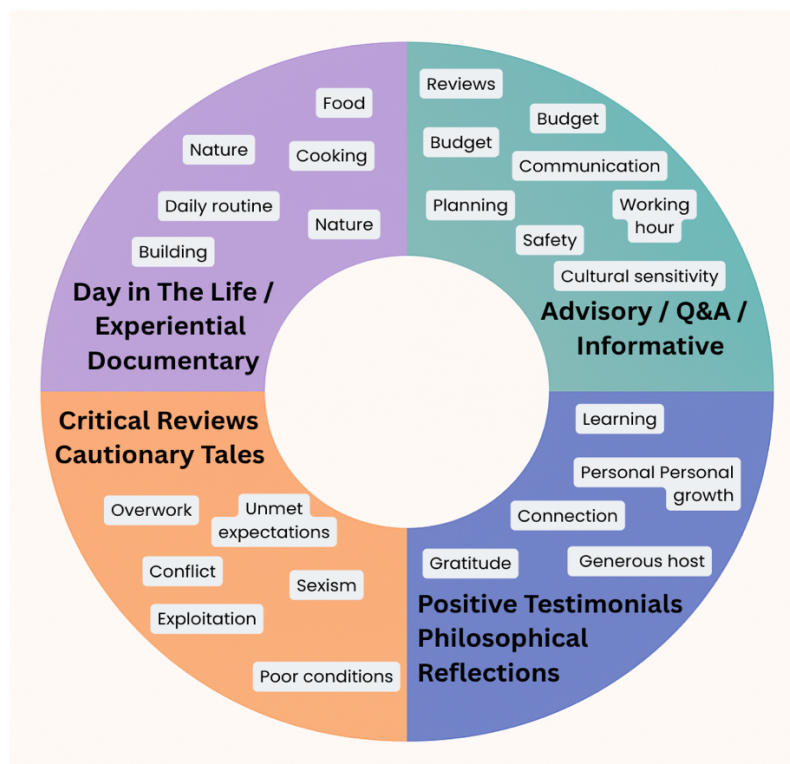


Figure 15: Categories of WWOOF Volunteer Vlogs

Through this integrated analytical process, an initial observation distinguishing between broadly “routine” and “reflective” vlogs was refined into a more nuanced thematic categorization, or typology, as presented in Figure 15. This detailed typology groups the vlogs based on shared communicative goals and presentational styles, revealing how different narrative forms contribute uniquely to the construction of WWOOFing experiences and the articulation of belonging. The "Day in the Life" or experiential documentary vlogs (which capture the essence of "routine" videos), for example, immerse viewers in the daily rhythms of farm work and communal living through both their visual sequences and narrated experiences. These narratives often subtly reveal the nature of belonging through textual and visual depictions of shared activities. The WWOOFer in Normandy, for instance, describes how "a lot of hours are spent cleaning up the vegetables from straight from the earth onto the table" for meals "everyone to enjoy together"; such a statement, typically accompanied by visuals of collaborative effort, textually and visually documents shared, mundane tasks. This documentation itself can signify a practical, lived sense of belonging and collective purpose forged through daily farm work. The vlogger in the Scottish Highlands, while detailing her routine of animal care, also shares a moment of connection with fellow volunteers: "most of your afternoons or evenings are free most of the time so in here we have went to the lake with the other two volunteers that were staying from and just let the start play". These glimpses into shared leisure, often visually represented, further underscore the development of temporary communities and relatedness.

Beyond these daily chronicles, a significant number of vlogs take on an Advisory or "Tips & Tricks" function (a form of "reflective" vlog), serving as a distinct form of digital mentorship and community care within the WWOOF network. Here, vloggers explicitly position themselves as experienced peers, sharing practical knowledge aimed at empowering future volunteers. This peer-to-peer guidance often highlights the agency required of WWOOFers. A

recurring piece of advice among volunteers centres on choosing hosts carefully, with strong emphasis on personal research and paying close attention to online reviews. One vlogger powerfully illustrates this: "really pay attention a lot to the reviews left on the farms... I looked at their reviews [for Denmark] not one single complaint, not one bad thing left on any of the farms and I was like okay that's it, I'm going to Denmark". This reliance on peer-generated reviews reflects a decentralised, community-driven approach to ensuring safety and compatibility, effectively creating a digitally mediated vetting system that fosters collective responsibility and belonging. Proactive communication with potential hosts, including video calls to "get a feel of what their energy is like", is also frequently stressed as a vital "relational improvisation" at the pre-departure stage.

In stark contrast, yet also falling under a "reflective" and often cautionary umbrella, are the Critical Reviews and Cautionary Tales. These vlogs, often arising from profoundly negative experiences, serve as both personal catharsis and stark warnings. While articulating experiences of non-belonging or exploitation, they paradoxically foster community solidarity by raising critical awareness. The vlogger recounting his Florida WWOOF stay as "the closest thing to slave labour", or Alice Cappelle's systemic critique using a WWOOF USA case of alleged review censorship, directly challenge idealized WWOOFing portrayals. The emotional vlog, "BAD MOTHER, BAD WWOOFER, EXPLAIN YOURSELF," further highlights WWOOFer vulnerability and the noted absence of recourse to WWOOF Ireland during an intense host conflict. Indeed, such reflective videos can be brutally honest in addressing disillusionment. They might include stories of racial bias or detail poor working conditions and gendered expectations. The advice shared often includes warnings about overwork, poor supervision, or unhealthy sleeping conditions, thereby helping prospective volunteers calibrate their expectations.

On the other end of the "reflective" spectrum, Positive Testimonials and Philosophical Reflections celebrate WWOOFing's transformative potential. These vlogs often brim with enthusiasm, highlighting deep connections with hosts and nature, constructing WWOOFing as a space for profound relatedness and belonging. The Q&A or Informative vlogs and Initial Impressions vlogs also contribute by demystifying the experience and capturing the tentative beginnings of relating to new environments.

This exchange of knowledge and experience extends beyond the videos themselves into the comment sections, where viewers engage in discussions that range from practical tips to deep ethical debates. These spaces act as forums where volunteers can share advice. This process helps create a collective understanding, which in turn reinforces bonds within the WWOOF network. The latter category of reflective vlogs, in particular, has been instrumental in sparking critical conversations around the values that underpin the WWOOF ethos. Occasionally, these exchanges take on a more profound tone, addressing ethical and philosophical dilemmas central to WWOOF's mission. For instance, Wild She Goes, a vlogger, shared her experiences working on a dairy farm, which sparked a debate in the comment section about the ethics of animal farming. One commenter, Ma vie dans le vent, shared:

"Those are some well-behaved Nubians, and congrats for getting out of your comfort zone to understand dairy farm life... Although consuming animal-based products doesn't promote animal cruelty here, it's actually a chance to go back to a humane, local food industry... These debates are important, and it's amazing we have the privilege to choose how we live."

In response, Wild She Goes explained her ethical stance:

"I agree it's a privilege to choose not to eat meat... If you're going to eat dairy and eggs, they'd better come from a place like this, but if you have the choice not

to, why would you? Loving animals and supporting exploitation don't sit right with me... Just posing these questions is a step in the right direction."

This exchange exemplifies how digital platforms can facilitate a form of digital belonging, connecting individuals through shared reflections and ethical considerations.

Across these diverse narrative forms, the host-WWOOFer relationship consistently emerges as the cornerstone of the experience, profoundly shaping a volunteer's sense of belonging and well-being. The vlogs show that positive hosts create environments where "fictive kinship" can flourish, while conflict often signals its breakdown. Shared practices, particularly around food and labour, are central to building this relatedness, and failures in providing adequate food become potent symbols of a lack of care.

The vlogs themselves also function as digital expressions of belonging. They foster a virtual community through the sharing of knowledge and peer support, a role that becomes especially important where direct administrative support from national organisations seems unmentioned or is perceived as less effective. The uncertainty faced by WWOOFers, particularly in the absence of formal agreements, as one vlogger explained, "you don't sign an official contract... technically the owners can change and do whatever they want" brings into focus the value of these peer-based online spaces. They become a kind of grassroots safety net, shaped through experience and circulated digitally, where volunteers offer each other practical advice and emotional reassurance.

The concept of "dwelling," or creating a temporary sense of home, also surfaces in these narratives as WWOOFers personalize transient spaces or connect deeply with the land and its ethos. The vlogger in Tuscany, for example, reflected on learning to "slow down." The COVID-19 pandemic subtly influences these stories, highlighting how crises can reshape connections and potentially amplify digital community building. Ultimately, the vlogs balance the reality

of mundane daily labour with moments of profound connection or challenge, where transformative experiences often emerge from the everyday fabric of shared farm life.

As Grace reflects on the role of digital platforms:

“My knowledge of the world has increased because I can actually connect to people from different places... even if I don’t get time to visit these other places, they can tell me about them.”

This highlights the power of digital connections. However, she, along with academic voices like Aare et al. (2020), also acknowledges the irreplaceable depth of in-person learning and embodied connection, noting: “You can talk all day online about growing or organic methods, but it’s another thing entirely to do it together.” These insights frame digital participation as complementary to, but distinct from, the tangible and sensory experiences of hands-on ecological participation.

Yet, digital spaces offer crucial advantages in the generous sharing of information and fostering authenticity. Platforms like YouTube provide access to personal reflections and practical guidance, creating space for diverse voices that help prepare newcomers for engagement with WWOOF communities. By offering both cautionary and affirming accounts, such vlogs expand WWOOF’s digital ecology, creating a broader and more inclusive entry point. This generosity of information sharing highlights the unique role of digital spaces in expanding WWOOF’s broader social network. Although the hands-on dimension of WWOOFing remains irreplaceable, these platforms offer an accessible means for engaging with the community’s core values and its lived realities, while also helping participants understand its potential challenges.

Looking ahead, while the diverse digital expressions of belonging found within the WWOOF vlog dataset have demonstrated the vital role these online narratives play in shaping anticipatory attunement and facilitating collective meaning-making, these mediated portrayals also invite a deeper inquiry into the on-the-ground complexities of the exchange. The curated nature of vlogs and online advice may not fully capture the nuanced dynamics of labour and learning, or the unspoken economic dimensions of the WWOOF experience. Therefore, the following chapter, "Reciprocity, Power Dynamics, and Economic Exchange," will turn to the on-farm ethnographic context. Building on the understanding of how WWOOFers digitally articulate connection and navigate challenges, Chapter 6 will explore the fundamental processes of anticipation, meaning-making, and particularly reciprocity, are dynamically enacted and negotiated. It will explore how these processes are also at times contested through the embodied practices of labour, learning, and direct cultural exchange. This shift will allow for an exploration of how WWOOF operates within a broader mixed economy of volunteering and ecological labour, where episodic forms of belonging intersect with shifting expectations, unequal obligations and the inherent power dynamics and diverse economic realities that shape each participant's unique WWOOFing journey.

CHAPTER 6: RECIPROCITY, POWER DYNAMICS, AND ECONOMIC EXCHANGE

In the darkness of the night, I knelt by the log burner stove heater in my little caravan. And carefully I added kindling to avoid the cold outside. While looking at the flickering fire, I looked at my camera and field notes lying on the table. And I thought, WWOOF feels just like a roll of film. And when we put it in the camera, we already have an idea of what to capture. But the result is not quite as what we would have imagined. The journey of WWOOF, I feel, is more or less like this. A journey of imagining the days out in the field and nature. But in fact, not everything is as beautiful as described, either in the pamphlet, in the article, or in the vlog. So, we don't know what is actually waiting for us. And like every developed frame from the film in the camera, will give us something unexpected.

Framing the Chapter: From Anticipation to Meaning-Making

This chapter examines how reciprocity is anticipated, experienced, and ultimately made meaningful within the WWOOF network. Rather than approaching volunteering as a fixed exchange of labour for accommodation, I treat it as a process that unfolds over time, shaped by expectations, encounters, and subsequent reflection. I am not concerned with evaluating whether WWOOF “works” or delivers particular outcomes, but with understanding how participants come to interpret their involvement and assess whether exchanges feel fair, meaningful, strained, or ambiguous.

My analysis therefore situates WWOOF within what I describe as a mixed economy of volunteering, a concept developed in Chapters 2 to capture how non-monetary exchange, informal labour, learning, hospitality, and ethical aspiration intersect with tourism, lifestyle experimentation, and economic constraint. Within this mixed economy, relationships are not governed solely by market logic, nor are they entirely outside it. Instead, they are shaped by shifting expectations, power dynamics, and the practical realities of sustaining everyday life on farms.

This chapter also reflects a shift in my own analytical approach over the course of the research. I began the project influenced by frameworks drawn from social movement studies and voluntourism research, particularly those emphasising motivation, identity formation, and perceived benefits. As the fieldwork developed, however, these approaches proved limiting. They tended to individualise participation and frame volunteering in evaluative or instrumental terms, asking what participants gained, rather than how relationships were negotiated and sustained over time. They also struggled to account for the diversity of reasons people entered WWOOF, many of which did not align with activist identities or coherent political commitments. In response, I moved away from the language of motivation and instead focus

on anticipation and meaning-making. Anticipation captures the open-ended and often loosely articulated ways in which volunteers and hosts imagine exchange before it begins. Meaning-making allows me to trace how these initial orientations are reworked through lived experience, reflection, and ongoing social relations, rather than assumed in advance.

The chapter is structured around two interrelated analytical triads. The first traces the volunteer journey through anticipation, participation, and reflection, highlighting how understandings of exchange shift over time. The second engages with classical anthropological discussions of reciprocity, particularly Sahlins' distinction between generalised, balanced, and negative reciprocity, which I rework as a heuristic point of reference rather than a fixed typology. Together, these triads provide a framework for examining how participants describe experiences of mutual benefit, strain, and more complex forms of exchange as relationships unfold.

To make these processes visible, the chapter is organised into two parts. Part I focuses on anticipation and volunteer journeys, examining how expectations are formed prior to arrival and how they shape early encounters on farms. Part II turns to reciprocity as a relational and interpretive process, exploring how participants come to make sense of what has been exchanged over time within the mixed economy of ecological volunteering.

Part I

Situating Volunteer Journeys within a Mixed Economy

In order to understand how reciprocity later comes to be interpreted and negotiated, this part of the chapter attends to the ways volunteer journeys within WWOOF take shape at the point of entry, before questions of exchange are explicitly articulated. Seen from this perspective, ecological volunteering is embedded within a broader field of non-monetary exchange that intersects with everyday economic constraint, ethical aspiration, and alternative ways of living. Within this setting, participation is shaped through shifting expectations, personal values, and the practical realities of sustaining life on farms.

In practice, volunteers enter this mixed economy through multiple routes and platforms, often moving fluidly between schemes such as WWOOF, HelpX, and local grassroots projects. These pathways are shaped by economic considerations, ethical orientations, and imagined futures, as participants seek forms of engagement that resonate with their values and aspirations. Much of this orientation work takes place through digital platforms, where volunteering is encountered in advance and framed in particular ways. Farm profiles, blogs, vlogs, and social media imagery frequently present WWOOF as an immersive and transformative experience, foregrounding ecological learning, community, and alternative ways of living. As earlier work on volunteer tourism has shown, such pre-participation narratives are crucial in shaping how volunteers anticipate and orient themselves toward participation (Wearing, 2001). In the contemporary context, these narratives are increasingly visual and affectively charged, presenting volunteering less as a temporary engagement and more as a lifestyle possibility.

Within this context, expectations function as social and ethical orientations that shape how volunteers approach work, learning, and relationships on farms. Volunteers often imagine participation as a pathway to personal growth, ecological competence, and moral alignment,

while hosts may frame their farms as sites of education, exchange, and shared values. These expectations, however, are rarely precise or fully articulated in advance. Instead, they form a flexible horizon against which experiences are interpreted, adjusted, and sometimes unsettled over the course of the exchange.

The discussion that follows opens with the ethnographic case study of David, whose volunteer trajectory illustrates how individuals navigate this mixed economy over time. David's movements across platforms, countries, and forms of participation reveal how anticipation, ethical aspiration, and material constraint are continuously negotiated in practice. His experiences provide a grounded entry point into the layered processes through which volunteer journeys are shaped, offering an ethnographic lens through which the subsequent analysis of anticipation, participation, and reflection can be understood.

Case Study: Navigating the Mixed Economy of Volunteering

I first met David on a drizzly Tuesday in early autumn. We were standing beside Matt and Morgan, the two-person host team at Valley Organic, wrestling a sagging sheet of polythene back over the farm's big polytunnel. David had come up the hill as a drop-in local volunteer, but the moment we paused for tea, Matt chuckled, "Ask him about France, he's done a fair bit of WWOOFing." That off-hand remark hinted at the layered routes through which labour, learning and idealism circulate at the farm: the same person who spends a damp morning hedge-laying in Todmorden may, a season later, be sleeping in a shepherd's hut hundreds of kilometres away, paid only in food, fellowship and ecological know-how.

Later that day David told me how his volunteer journey began at a point of pragmatic hardship. "I did it through Help X. It was a bit cheaper," he laughed, recalling a spell of unemployment when "I didn't fancy going on the dole; couldn't find a job that was good, so I thought I'd just go off". Price, however, was only one part of the calculation. His first placement, a three-week

stay in 2014 on a hillside small-holding near Oloron-Sainte-Marie, set the standard for all his subsequent experiences.

“Summer in the Pyrenees,” he remembered, “a proper permaculture project, really sort of intelligent host ... lots of actual vegetables”. Over long lunches he and the other volunteers swapped recipes and theory; evenings ended with local wine and plans for terracing the next field. Only later did David realize that the farmer “advertised on Help X and WWOOF as well,” a sign that hosts, no less than volunteers, move easily across multiple platforms to widen their options. This fluid listing and cross-platform engagement underscore a strategic adaptability within the mixed economy of volunteering, where diverse visibility enhances resource flows for both parties.

Two years after that idyll he booked a winter placement in Normandy, again through Help X, and met its obverse. The small-holder, he says, “wasn’t really in the vibe ... didn’t care about the planet ... a little bit depressed, and, yeah, a bit racist”. Alone in a damp caravan, he spent bleak afternoons mucking out horses that “she just kind of had” and evenings wondering why he had fled to northern France in January. “Considering I’ve only done two Help X experiences, that’s a fifty-per-cent success rate,” he grins wryly, but the contrast sharpened his sense of what distinguishes a nourishing exchange from cheap labour. This disjuncture between his initial ‘digital idealism’ and the ‘lived reality’ of the second farm became a formative lesson in navigating the unpredictable terrain of volunteer expectations.

Back in West Yorkshire David began dipping into nearby grassroots projects, Manchester’s Gaskell Garden Project and the weekly workdays at Valley Organic. Turning volunteering into something he could “swing by ... when other commitments allow”. Yet the lure of transnational travel never disappeared. “I might actually go with the WWOOF website rather than Help X this time round. WWOOF’s more focused, a gathering of ethically-minded people ... you pay

extra for that filtering process,” he explained, preparing a spring cycling odyssey that would stitch together farms from Burgundy to the Cévennes. Platform choice, in other words, is both moral and economic: WWOOF’s fee buys what David hopes will be better host screening and stronger value alignment. This deliberate shift reflects a strategic recalibration of his 'becoming' as an ecological volunteer, prioritizing ethical resonance over mere transactional convenience.

When asked what keeps him toggling among platforms, he offers a layered answer. “There’s loads of other learning ... it’s exercise, mental health, just generally feeling the sunshine and the wind on your skin,” he says, before adding the “spiritual side ... it feels good to be part of something that’s helping with climate change and the flaws of modern capitalist living”. But aspiration meets material constraints. “Land here’s crazy. It’s feudalism, really,” he sighs; “my mum and dad bought an acre with a house in France for thirty grand, so that pops into my head as a place I could go and put into practice what I’ve learned”. Saving for that patch of ground shapes every choice: the platforms he joins, the seasons he travels, even the beetroot he accepts as thanks for a day’s logging. This continuous negotiation between his material desires and his ecological aspirations embodies the 'unfinished' nature of his transformational journey.

On the hill above Todmorden, those macro questions compress into smaller, regular rhythms: “It’s a nice vibe ... it’s close ... good for my mental health, you meet nice people and you learn lots of stuff,” David says of Valley Organic. The farm, in turn, rides its own mixed economy, combining day volunteers like David, medium-term Workawayers such as Declan, and the occasional international WWOOFer so that Matt and Morgan can keep a lean enterprise afloat.

The appearance of what has been termed ecological volunteering today is braided from many channels rather than funnelled through a single gate. Hosts cross-list, volunteers multi-home, and everyone balances ethics, cash, companionship and the promise of future land. One week that calculus leads David to a morning of hedge-laying in West Yorkshire; the next it may send

him, panniers rattling, towards the Pyrenees again. The mixed economy of volunteering is a practical reality, and not an abstract structure. It's the everyday calculation by which people like David decide where to live and work, whether under Yorkshire plastic or beneath the French mountain sun.

Exploring Anticipation and Meaning-Making in WWOOF Exchange

Meaning-making in volunteer tourism and particularly within the WWOOF network is a layered and evolving process. It is shaped by personal aspirations and ethical desires. It also involves shifting relational dynamics. Volunteers and hosts often frame these exchanges as opportunities for immersive eco-learning, rather than mere material transactions. The WWOOF journey, in this sense, becomes a site where individuals seek to reconfigure their relationships with work, nature, and community. These acts of seeking, however, are not neutral. They are animated by forms of anticipation, including hopes and investments, which profoundly shape how experiences unfold.

Anthropologists such as Stephan and Flaherty (2019) and Biehl and Locke (2010) have drawn attention to anticipation as a lived and affective experience, beyond mere mental forecasting. People inhabit futures before they arrive, organizing their present around desired outcomes or imagined ethical transformations. In the context of WWOOF, anticipation focuses on who one hopes to become, a more grounded, skilled, or ecologically conscious person, rather than simply where one might go. This prefigurative orientation, what I term as “digital idealism”, is cultivated through vlogs, farm profiles, blogs, and images of simple, communal life that circulate online.

Before volunteers even step foot on a farm, their expectations are shaped by these representations, often framed around shared meals, hands-on learning, and deep connection with hosts and land. As Wearing (2001) has suggested in earlier work on volunteer tourism,

pre-trip narratives are crucial in shaping volunteer motivations. Today, these narratives have become increasingly visual, aesthetic, and affectively charged. In digital portrayals, WWOOF mostly appears as a lifestyle possibility rather than a temporary engagement. This shift is particularly evident in digital media, where WWOOF is less exclusively presented as a transient volunteer opportunity, and more commonly portrayed as an alternative lifestyle choice. These digital narratives construct an image of WWOOF as an experience that seamlessly integrates several key elements. Firstly, it portrays ethical labour as a fulfilling and intrinsically valuable activity, emphasizing the direct contribution to sustainable agriculture and ecological practices. Secondly, it highlights the rich potential for intercultural exchange, showing participants engaging with diverse communities and learning about different ways of life. Thirdly, it positions WWOOF as a pathway for personal growth and self-discovery, suggesting that the experience can lead to significant individual transformation. The amalgamation of these elements in digital portrayals creates a compelling narrative of WWOOF as an aspirational and deeply enriching way of living, transcending its initial conception as a simple work exchange program. What happens, then, when this idealized image encounters the nuanced and sometimes challenging realities of on-farm participation?

Based on my observations and interactions during fieldwork, meaning-making in WWOOF unfolds across three distinct yet interconnected stages: pre-participation expectations, in-situ perceptions during participation, and post-participation reflections. Each stage is shaped by both participants' interactions and activities and their emotional recalibrations and ethical realignments. These shifting experiences represent what Biehl and Locke (2010) call the "unfinished" nature of becoming, where desires for transformation remain suspended between aspiration and lived reality. In what follows, I explore how anticipation functions as a structuring force in volunteers' journeys, revealing how futures are imagined, negotiated, and often redefined through the everyday work of ecological exchange.

Pre-Participation Expectation

During my fieldwork, I interviewed individuals, asking them to recall their aspirations and expectations prior to embarking on their first volunteering journeys within this network of volunteering activities. The narratives that emerged were both diverse in individual aims and shared several common themes, providing insight into the anticipations participants brought with them. This exploration reveals how volunteers engaging in WWOOF, and similar non-monetary and ecological initiatives in this study, come into the network with intentions that go beyond transactional exchange, viewing their participation as a way to access ethical ecological engagement that aligns with their interests and worldviews.

One participant, Garry, a local volunteer in this study, exemplifies individuals who come to such initiatives with minimal expectations or background in agriculture. As he described,

"I was completely ignorant of how to grow things before I started volunteering, really. I had no practical experience of growing... I hadn't a clue really because I had never volunteered on a farm before this; it was all new to me."

This openness suggests that some volunteers approach the experience as an opportunity to embrace new challenges and learn organically through participation, without fixed preconceptions. For Garry, farming represented uncharted territory, but his willingness to adapt and engage highlights the flexibility that some participants bring to their volunteering experiences. For participants, learning is central to their expectations when joining WWOOF or similar exchange. Research on volunteer tourism suggests that participants often seek experiential, hands-on learning environments where they can acquire practical skills and develop new insights (Wearing, 2001). Within WWOOF, volunteers frequently express a desire to gain knowledge in sustainable farming, anticipating that their learning will come through direct involvement in the realities of farm life. This takes place as volunteers gain skills

and understanding by working alongside hosts in daily farming activities, embedding learning in the practices of the community.

Furthermore, volunteers also see the WWOOF experience as an opportunity to shape their ecological identities by working directly with values of environmental stewardship. This deeper connection to sustainability and ecological care resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) perspective that engaging in ecological spaces constitutes an act of care, fulfilling ethical commitments to sustainability and interconnectedness. As this section explores, these values will be revisited in greater detail in the discussion on care and sustainability in ecological practices in the following chapter.

Hosts like Arthur and Julie emphasise the importance of genuine engagement and shared purpose over merely using WWOOF as an affordable travel option. Arthur explains,

"The worst part is having people who are not really interested... who are simply coming because they want to travel and have no interest in what they're doing. But we don't get that many people because we're quite careful when we select people."

Julie adds that they actively screen for individuals whose values align with their goals, ensuring a deeper level of commitment from volunteers. This screening process often draws on how volunteers describe themselves in emails or profiles using phrases such as 'keen interest in sustainable practices and organic methods', or a desire to 'learn self-sufficiency or homesteading skills', which hosts read as indicators of shared values (see Figure 17 for examples from WWOOF profiles). As Smith and Font (2014) argue, when cultural exchange is approached primarily for personal gain, it risks turning these experiences into commodified interactions, detracting from the sincerity and mutuality of the exchange. Arthur and Julie's

approach highlights the need for genuine connection, where both hosts and volunteers find intrinsic meaning in their contributions, establishing a foundation of mutual understanding.

Member since 2025 Updated 5 months ago

About me

I am a mature aged woman who has a keen interest and long experience in gardening and livestock. I work as a self employed bicycle-powered gardener, have my own extensive garden, always keep poultry, currently guinea-pigs (to maintain fruit cages) and have previously kept house cows, goats and rabbits.

I last woofed in the early 90s in my home country of Australia and while I plan a trip to Europe this year I want to make the most of it by checking out some woofing places.

I am married (to a man I met woofing!), with a grown up family and I don't smoke or habitually drink etc.

Show less

What motivates me to WWOOF

I love working with plants and animals and seeing different ways of doing things. I also have a keen interest in sustainable practices and organic methods. Woofing is a great way to be part of someone else's project for a while to see different people, places and lifestyles.

What I most hope to gain from WWOOFing

🏠 Learn self-sufficiency or homesteading skills

🌿 Have a meaningful adventure

📍 Live like a local

I'm interested in

🥬 Vegetable farming

🌰 Fruit or nut farming

🐔 Poultry farming

Figure 16: Example WWOOF Volunteer Profile Highlighting Aspirations

(source: <https://www.woof.org.uk>)

Even with aligned values, expectations do not always perfectly match on-site realities. Through ongoing collaboration, a clearer understanding of each other's working dynamics takes shape. Hosts like Arthur and Julie remain mindful of this balance, seeking volunteers who are neither overly focused on personal gain nor disengaged in their approach. This expectation of reciprocity reflects an inherent power dynamic in volunteer tourism, where hosts play a pivotal role in shaping the volunteer's experience by defining boundaries and setting the tone for engagement. This evolving understanding often contrasts with the initial expectations participants bring to the WWOOF exchange, demonstrating the fluid nature of these

relationships. Yet, these interactions frequently allow initial assumptions to transform into practical insights and mutual growth.

The emphasis on shared intentions reflects the wider ethos of WWOOF, where mutual interest and collaboration enable participants to engage in sustainable practices. According to Mostafanezhad (2013), participation in such activities is often inspired by environmental ethics, which reinforce how these engagements embody ecological commitments. For many, WWOOFing is both a manifestation and expression of environmental responsibility. Participants view their work on these farms as a way to actively support sustainable practices, align their actions with ecological values, and make a tangible difference to the environment. Many hosts share this ecological alignment, seeing WWOOF as a platform for environmental advocacy and an opportunity to pass on sustainable practices.

One illustrative example is Yuki, a Japanese volunteer who first encountered WWOOF during her time at The Bridge Institute in East Yorkshire. Originally enrolled in a climate activism course that was meant to send her to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, her plans were disrupted when the island experienced a volcanic eruption and global COVID-19 restrictions prevented travel. Left in limbo and unsure how to spend her remaining months in the UK, Yuki turned to WWOOF after a fellow volunteer mentioned it. “I just Googled environmental volunteering,” she said, describing how she joined the WWOOF website and began searching for farms. She was drawn to one profile in particular, which depicts a small garden run by an older woman in Wales. “Her house looked amazing,” Yuki recalled. “She looked like a white-haired grandma, very kind.” The farm photos and brief description projected warmth and tranquillity, aligning with Yuki’s desire for comfort, healing, and reconnection following a difficult period.

Yet the digital idealism was quickly challenged when Yuki arranged a video call with the host. “She didn’t smile once,” Yuki said. “She had a straight face the whole time.” When Yuki

explained that she was still learning and had limited gardening experience, the host replied, “I was hoping you’d be a little bit more handy than that.” More concerning was the host’s request that Yuki not speak to her after 8 p.m. in order to preserve her ‘quiet time.’ Although framed politely, the interaction left Yuki feeling unwelcome. “The facial expression and everything was just not warm,” she recalled. Sensing that the relationship would not be reciprocal, Yuki declined the offer. Instead, she contacted another host who was a garden coordinator at Primrose Organic Farm near Brecon National Park. The host response was encouraging and immediately welcomed her with generosity. “He was really kind and thoughtful,” Yuki said. “When I told him I was new to farming, he said, ‘Of course, that’s no problem.’” Yuki’s experience underscores how quickly anticipated relationships can shift. This occurs through on-site labour and, crucially, even before arrival, as digital representations meet interpersonal realities.

Now that we have examined Yuki’s story, it highlights the fragility and recalibration of expectations within the WWOOF process, and the emotional labour volunteers must often perform in navigating unfamiliar relational terrain. These anticipatory experiences, shaped by digital portrayals, peer stories, and personal desires frame how WWOOFers approach their placements. Yet, as Yuki’s story illustrates, these imagined futures are often subject to emotional recalibration and reorientation. Whether through disappointment, hesitation, or serendipitous alignment, volunteers continually negotiate the meaning of their engagement even before they arrive. In the next section, I turn to how these anticipations shift once volunteers begin their placements, encountering the practical, affective, and interpersonal dimensions of farm life.

Perception During Participation

When participants begin their WWOOF experiences, their day-to-day interactions often reshape the expectations they brought with them. Each volunteer arrives with aspirations, whether it's to learn technical skills, gain hands-on farming experience, or connect with others. Once on-site, however, they encounter the farm realities, which often require them to adapt. As Mostafanezhad (2016) notes, tensions can arise when volunteers' assumptions about the experience differ from the practical realities and responsibilities they encounter on the farm. These real-time adjustments often push participants to recalibrate their expectations, offering opportunities for growth and discovery as they navigate the evolving demands of farm life.

For some, the realities of participation can challenge their expectations, especially regarding the collaborative aspect of volunteering. At The Bridge Institute, Louis and another volunteer found themselves working alone on a large organic plot, preparing beds for potatoes. The work involved spreading horse manure and rushing to prepare the soil in time for a rented machine to plough the beds. Louis expressed that he had anticipated the joy of working in a group, imagining the tasks would be more enjoyable and manageable with a team. Instead, the workload felt demanding, and the lack of shared labour left him feeling overburdened. Though initially overwhelmed, Louis found a sense of accomplishment in seeing his progress, reflecting how volunteers often derive satisfaction from adapting to unexpected circumstances. This experience highlights how mismatched expectations, such as assuming many hands would share the workload, can lead to emotional strain and feelings of inequity.

In contrast to Louis's isolated experience, Declan's time at Valley Organic demonstrated how hands-on collaboration could sometimes exceed expectations and deepen understanding. Having read extensively about composting and watched instructional videos, Declan arrived with a strong interest in sustainable practices but limited practical experience. Reflecting on his time at the farm, he shared,

“I’d been reading up on compost... you know, acid levels, nitrate levels, heat and everything like that. Then when I came here and asked Matt about it, he explained it in very simple terms; how to layer stuff, leave it, and you can grow on it at the same time. I didn’t know you could do that⁵.”

This transition from theoretical knowledge to practical, embodied learning illustrates how WWOOF transforms abstract concepts into experiential understanding.

The process of composting became not just a task but a gateway for Declan to form deeper connections with his host and the land. The simplicity of Matt’s approach prompted Declan to reconsider his preconceptions about farming, revealing how practical work could be both accessible and unexpectedly transformative. As Yamamoto and Engelsted (2014) observe, WWOOF enables individuals to gain first-hand knowledge of organic farming techniques through direct involvement, deepening their understanding of sustainable practices. Nakagawa (2018) similarly notes that physical engagement in farm labour encourages reflection, which can foster meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability. For Declan, collaborating with other volunteers gave additional depth to the experience, strengthening his sense of purpose and belonging on the farm.

Through his participation, Declan transitioned from a passive learner to an active contributor, finding meaning in his daily tasks. This reciprocity, both in labour and understanding, enhanced Declan’s connection to the farm’s sustainable ethos, illustrating how WWOOF fosters growth through immersive engagement.

⁵ This method is known as a *hot bed* — a composting technique used especially for early-season vegetables. As the composting materials decompose, they generate heat that warms the soil layered above, accelerating germination and early growth. While familiar to some experienced organic growers, this method is not widely known among new volunteers, making its discovery part of the practical learning journey.

Additionally, for hosts like Matt, balancing volunteers' expectations with the farm's needs is key to creating a meaningful exchange. With over eight years of experience hosting volunteers, Matt emphasised the energy and perspectives participants brought to the farm. He explained,

“The spirit people bring... they generally come with energy, and that energy is passed on to the host. Every time I take somebody on a tour in the greenhouse, it makes me think about it from the volunteer's perspective, which teaches me what I need to learn or explain better.”

Matt's reflections demonstrate how the hosting process is reciprocal, offering both volunteers practical knowledge and encouraging hosts to refine their communication and adapt their teaching.

Beyond learning farming techniques, volunteers often discovered that their roles evolved to include broader social and relational dimensions. Declan, for instance, found that time spent outside of farming tasks like preparing meals with other volunteers or discussing ideas with Matt added another layer of meaning to his experience. These interactions fostered an environment of respect and curiosity, where boundaries between work and social engagement blurred. This dynamic reflects the evolving nature of reciprocity, where volunteers contribute more than labour, becoming part of a relational ecosystem that sustains the farm community. Matt's flexibility as a host allowed volunteers like Declan to take on roles that aligned with their interests while contributing meaningfully to the farm. Declan's curiosity and Matt's openness created a collaborative atmosphere, exemplifying a dynamic learning environment where both hosts and volunteers adjust their roles to achieve mutual benefit. As described by Burns and Konno (2015), WWOOF encourages learning through cooperative, non-monetary exchanges that foster social development. This reciprocal framework allows volunteers like Declan to gain practical skills in organic farming, and at the same time, hosts like Matt benefit

from the fresh perspectives and enthusiasm that volunteers bring. Their interaction illustrates how WWOOF fosters an environment where learning and teaching are mutually enriching, aligning with the program's ethos of shared growth through collaboration. While Declan would later express frustrations with other aspects of the farm's structure and task allocation, his engagement with Matt represents one of the few moments where his desire for pedagogical reciprocity was met, although for a while.

By the end of their participation, volunteers like Louis and Declan often found that their initial expectations had not only shifted but expanded. Through unexpected challenges, collaborative moments, and the exchange of knowledge, participants moved from passive learners to active contributors. What, then, constitutes the full value of their contribution in such fluid, non-monetary reciprocal exchanges? As we turn to post-participation reflections, we will explore how these transformative experiences continue to shape their interpretations of the journey and its long-term impacts.

Post-Participation Reflections

After leaving the farms, many WWOOF participants entered a phase of reflection, reconsidering the broader significance of their experiences. For them, the impact of volunteering extended far beyond their time on the farm, leading to lasting changes in values, lifestyle choices, and personal priorities. This reflective stage often involved reinterpreting their roles and contributions, as participants recognized the deeper transformations their WWOOF journeys had sparked.

Gio, an Italian volunteer in her late twenties, described how the experience deepened her environmental awareness, influencing her daily decisions long after returning home. She had previously volunteered on farms in Israel, Tenerife, and Saint Vincent, but it was during her time in the UK, first at a community-supported agriculture (CSA) farm in Wales, and later at

The Bridge Institute, that her relationship with food and sustainability was profoundly reshaped. “In Wales, I was doing seed saving... there were only two people running everything. It was very tough, but I liked the job and what they were doing for the community.” Working closely with growers who were deeply committed to sustainable practices sparked a shift in her thinking.

“I remember crying one day while harvesting kale,” she said, “because it was raining, it was cold, and I was freezing. But then I thought, ‘This is what it means to produce food.’ And still, I saw the seeds I planted grow and that moment, it was magic.”

Reflecting on these experiences, Mia explained how she felt a renewed sense of responsibility toward sustainable living:

“So OK, that was like the worst moment. But after I say no, I want to keep doing it because I really want to stay here and after I get used to this weather too because you can get used to everything. I think it’s a life-changing experience because sometimes the people that do this kind of experience, they don’t come back to their normal life. If you learn how to grow your own food, all the world changes. All your perspective of the world changes, so it’s much more difficult after this to come back to buy from the supermarket.”

For many, WWOOF was more than a short-term escape or an educational experience; it served as a catalyst for a broader environmental ethic. Mia often found inspiration in the hosts she worked with: individuals who were deeply connected to their land and committed to sustainable practices. Her insights highlight the transformative potential of WWOOF, where learning to cultivate food fosters a deep ecological consciousness and a re-evaluation of daily habits. Yet her story also shows that this transformation comes through discomfort and dislocation, not

just inspiration. This aligns with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) concept of ecological care, positioning physical labour in WWOOF contexts as a relational commitment to the environment. Additionally, Hammersley (2013) highlights that the most profound outcomes of volunteer tourism often emerge from the relationships it cultivates. These interactions between volunteers and hosts foster connections. They reinforce individual transformations and also contribute to collective ecological ethics, as volunteers and hosts inspire one another to sustain these practices long after the experience ends.

Beyond fostering environmental awareness, WWOOFing also sparked personal growth and resilience for Yuki, a Japanese volunteer we've discussed earlier. Yuki had originally planned to join a climate activism programme through The Bridge Institute, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a volcanic eruption in Saint Vincent. Left with unexpected time in the UK, she turned to WWOOF and found placement on a small organic farm in Wales. Reflecting on her experience, she explained:

"Probably the biggest thing I learned is I can live like this; I can also make a living being a farmer. It's something I never expected from myself... This WWOOFing experience showed me there's another way."

For Yuki, the experience opened up new possibilities for a life she had not previously imagined, shifting her perspective on what it means to live sustainably and independently, though always in the context of mutual support and shared labour. She emphasised how WWOOFing gave her a sense of comfort and security, knowing that even without conventional employment, farming provided a viable and fulfilling alternative. Through her reflections, it becomes clear that WWOOFing can offer more than practical knowledge; it fosters a transformative process of self-discovery and personal realignment.

Still, not all transformations come through idyllic scenarios, some are shaped by frictions, as seen in the more critical account offered by Timothy Ward. Ward's widely viewed YouTube vlog recounted a difficult WWOOFing experience where a host imposed traditional gender roles, resulting in emotional and ethical discomfort. Reflecting on this experience, Ward openly shared his disappointment and offered advice for future volunteers, including the importance of identifying red flags and having backup plans. His storytelling serves as both a cautionary tale and a guide, equipping new participants with tools to navigate potential challenges while encouraging a mindful approach to participation.



Figure 17: A Vlog of Timothy Ward Reflects on His WWOOFing Experience

(Source: <https://www.youtube.com>)

While these narratives are curated rather than fully “unfiltered,” Ward’s vlog nonetheless contributes to a sense of transparency and communal learning within the digital WWOOF space. His reflections illustrate how platforms like YouTube can serve as sites of critical storytelling, where volunteers document ethical tensions and expose disconnects between ideals and lived realities. These dynamics of digital advocacy, disillusionment, and the contradictions of sustainability will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 7, through Timothy’s case and broader critiques of greenwashing in WWOOF.

These reflections highlight how post-WWOOFing experiences extend beyond immediate participation, blending personal growth with relational and ecological insights. While participants like Mia and Yuki illustrate the potential for transformation, critical accounts such as Timothy Ward's emphasise the need for preparation and adaptability. Together, these narratives reveal that WWOOFing is not simply a labour exchange but an evolving engagement with values that transcend practical work. From fostering heightened ecological awareness and self-discovery to navigating cultural empathy and ethical responsibility, these experiences resonate with participants' long-term aspirations. Based on these, we can view WWOOF as a space where learning, connection, and reflection unfold in ways that continue to shape participants' relationships with themselves, others, and the environment. This dynamic relationship between personal transformation and collective exchange deepens the understanding of WWOOF as more than just a practical endeavour. Yet, it also raises the question: what happens when things don't go as planned?

Part II

Making Sense of Reciprocity within a Mixed Economy

The reflections that close Part I raise a crucial question: what happens when expectations, effort, and ethical aspiration fail to align in practice? While the earlier sections traced how volunteer journeys take shape through anticipation and participation, this part of the chapter turns to how those experiences are subsequently interpreted, evaluated, and negotiated as forms of reciprocity. The focus shifts from how participation unfolds to how hosts and volunteers make sense of what has been exchanged, and whether those exchanges are remembered as fair, sustaining, disappointing, or strained. This shift also clarifies why I move away from the language of “perceived benefits” and outcome-based evaluation. Rather than asking what participants gained from their involvement in WWOOF, I attend to how they narrate, justify, and contest exchange over time, focusing on how value is recognised, withheld, or redefined as relationships develop.

To examine these dynamics, this part engages with classical anthropological discussions of reciprocity, particularly Sahlins’ (1972/2004) distinction between generalised, balanced, and negative reciprocity. These categories are treated not as fixed types but as points of reference for tracing how participants themselves describe movement between openness, obligation, and perceived imbalance as relationships develop over time. Exchanges that begin in a spirit of goodwill may later be reassessed as uneven, or retrospectively reinterpreted as expectations accumulate and circumstances shift.

This interpretive work is shaped by unequal positions within the exchange. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) account of capital as accumulated labour-time and social power, this section attends to how resources are differentially mobilised, converted, and recognised within

WWOOF relationships. For Bourdieu (1986), capital is not only material, but accumulated labour that can be converted into social recognition and authority; it often works through recognition and misrecognition, appearing as generosity, competence, or moral standing rather than as power. From this perspective, the question is not simply what is exchanged, but whose time, skills, and commitments are able to solidify into lasting advantage, and whose remain provisional, contingent, or taken for granted.

Within WWOOF, hosts typically control access to land, food, accommodation, and daily routines, shaping the conditions under which exchange takes place. Volunteers, in turn, often invest labour with expectations of learning, inclusion, or meaningful participation. These expectations are not always realised evenly, and their fulfilment is subject to ongoing negotiation. Such asymmetries do not necessarily imply exploitation, but they structure how reciprocity is experienced and reassessed over time. Seen from this perspective, reciprocity within WWOOF is therefore inseparable from questions of power, responsibility, and sustainability. Broader economic pressures, rising costs of hosting, and the routinisation of platform-based volunteering shape how obligations are understood and renegotiated. The discussion opens with the ethnographic case study of Grace, a long-term host whose experiences foreground the ongoing negotiations involved in hosting and show how ideals of exchange are worked out through everyday practice.

Case Study: Hosting Realities

Grace's journey into organic farming and hosting WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) volunteers began with a solid academic foundation and transformative early career experiences. While teaching in Tanzania at an agricultural secondary school, she observed how students were required to grow their own food as part of government policy. This hands-on practice underscored the essential role of agriculture in fostering independence

and meeting basic needs. The experience left a deep impression on Grace, as it showcased agriculture as a means of sustenance as well as a tool for empowerment and self-reliance, sparking her early interest in the field.

“When I was in Tanzania, the school was an agricultural school, and everyone had to grow their own food. That’s where I became fascinated by agriculture. Later, I studied for a master’s in soil chemistry and then went on to study for my PhD. While I was doing all that, I was becoming interested in the alternatives to conventional agriculture because I didn’t like chemical agriculture - it treated soil as if it were inert. The whole direction that everything was going in worried me, with big companies only interested in profit, not people or the planet.”

Her academic pursuit of soil chemistry revealed an increasing disillusionment with industrialised farming practices. Grace’s early role as an educator saw her teaching students about conventional agricultural techniques, including the application of fertilizers. However, the deeper she immersed herself in the study of soil science, the more she began to question these methods. She noticed a troubling dissonance between the scientific understanding of soil as a complex, living system and the industrialised model that reduced it to a passive, inert substrate.

“In particular, you know, I was teaching students about how amazing soil was. And then just telling them, ignore it. Just put on the fertilizer. To grow crops because basically conventional agriculture just treats soil as an inert medium in which you grow plants and you provide them with all the nutrients and the chemicals.”

This growing awareness fuelled Grace’s transition toward organic farming. She became increasingly uncomfortable with the environmental harm caused by conventional practices,

which prioritized chemical inputs and short-term yields over the long-term health and sustainability of the soil. The decision to shift her focus to organic methods unfolded as she sought alternatives that aligned with her values and scientific understanding, setting the stage for her commitment to more ecologically sound agricultural practices. Grace's journey toward organic farming involved both a scientific evolution and a personal and societal challenge. Her advocacy for alternative agricultural methods in the 1970s placed her in a field that was dominated by men and deeply skeptical of non-conventional approaches. The broader agricultural community often dismissed her progressive ideas as overly idealistic, with many colleagues considering them impractical for large-scale or commercial farming. These perceptions were compounded by Grace's position as one of the few women in the field, making her advocacy an uphill battle.

"In the 70s, having views like that, I was considered crazy. I was in a very difficult position. Because I had unusual views, plus I was a woman. There were no female members of staff. I was young, female, and seen as crazy. It just became very hard fighting against those attitudes in agriculture."

The combination of professional skepticism and gender bias made Grace's pursuit of sustainable farming methods uniquely challenging. Yet, these difficulties only strengthened her resolve. Her ability to persist in the face of resistance became a defining feature of her journey, one that underscored her commitment to rethinking agricultural practices and establishing credibility for organic farming in a skeptical industry. Despite the challenges she faced, Grace's commitment to sustainable farming grew stronger. Her vision extended beyond cultivating crops to creating a space for learning, collaboration, and exchange. Hosting WWOOF volunteers became an extension of this vision, offering a way to connect with others who shared an interest in agriculture and sustainability. Grace's initial involvement with WWOOF was rooted in the practicalities of running an organic farm in Scotland. The idea of sharing

knowledge and meeting people appealed to her, particularly as a way to balance the workload on her farm.

“I was already running an organic farm in Scotland. I joined because I liked the idea of sharing knowledge and meeting other people. There was plenty of work on the farm, and I appreciated some help. Back then, the word ‘WWOOF’ stood for ‘Working Weekends on Organic Farms.’”

Grace saw hosting as more than a practical solution to managing her farm. It became an opportunity to create a collaborative environment where knowledge and experiences could be exchanged. For Grace, WWOOF embodied the values of mutual support and shared learning, which resonated with her broader philosophy of organic farming. In the early years of hosting, Grace’s farm attracted volunteers who shared her interest in gardening and were eager to engage in organic farming. Many came with a genuine curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, making these early exchanges fulfilling. Grace valued the mutual effort and respect that characterized these interactions, as volunteers offered their energy and ideas while gaining practical insights from her experience. The relationships formed during this time often extended beyond their visits, leaving Grace with a sense of purpose and connection that reinforced her reasons for hosting. However, as WWOOF grew in popularity and became easier to access through digital platforms, Grace noticed changes in the motivations of some volunteers. While many still came with a genuine interest in farming, others seemed to approach WWOOF as a convenient way to travel inexpensively, often showing less engagement with the work. Reflecting on this shift, Grace observed:

“Some years ago, as WWOOF became more well-known, people started using it for traveling. I noticed some volunteers were just there to pass the time or meet

language requirements. They weren't interested in farming. They were lazy and just taking advantage of hosts, which felt disappointing."

This shift in volunteer motivations disrupted the balance Grace had come to appreciate, leaving her to navigate the challenges of managing expectations while trying to maintain the spirit of collaboration and learning that had initially drawn her to hosting. The changing motivations of some volunteers occasionally disrupted the sense of reciprocity Grace valued in hosting. One particularly frustrating experience involved a volunteer who initially appeared to have genuine intentions but soon revealed otherwise. Grace recounted how the individual arrived with a story of personal hardship, portraying himself as in dire need of help. Although his situation seemed compelling, it became clear that he had planned to use Grace's farm as a temporary base for other pursuits.

"There was a WWOOFer who came, and it turned out that he didn't really intend to do any work. He told me a long story about his terrible life and his family didn't care and all sorts of stuff. But when he came, he had organized a meeting at the Job Center. So he was using me as a place to stay so that he could go and find a job. And as it happened, he got a job... But then he told me all this story, so I felt sorry for him. So I... I would be with, you know, I could have just said go. This is not WWOOFing. You've misled me. You already knew when you came that you were going to do this. But I said, OK, I will let you stay. But you're not helping me, so I expect you to contribute to your food and, you know, the electricity that you're using."

Despite her reservations, Grace empathized with the volunteer and decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. She asked for a modest contribution of £30 per week to cover shared expenses such as food and utilities, a condition he agreed to. For the first week, the arrangement

seemed to function without issue. However, Grace began noticing a change in his behavior. After returning from his new job one day, the volunteer became reclusive, retreating to his room and avoiding interaction. The following day, he announced his departure, explaining that someone had offered him a ride elsewhere. Grace was prepared for him to leave but felt blindsided when he departed without honoring their agreement. The incident left Grace feeling both betrayed and frustrated. She had extended her trust and offered flexibility under the assumption that the volunteer would respect the minimal request she had made. His refusal to contribute, even after earning money, struck Grace as an abuse of her hospitality and goodwill. Reflecting on the experience, she recognized the emotional toll such incidents could take, particularly as they challenged her longstanding commitment to generosity and trust.

“And what I did about that was to complain to WWOOF and explain to them what had happened. Um, because I didn’t want him to do that to someone else. Um, but WWOOF was not helpful. He told them some story, and they just emailed and said, ‘It has obviously been a misunderstanding,’ and that’s it. But it wasn’t a misunderstanding. It was more than that. And that upset me so much because I’ve had many WWOOFers with many problems. But I never had, well, apart from one other, I never had anybody that I felt was taking advantage and abusing the hospitality. And that made me feel very uncomfortable because I didn’t want to mistrust the next person that came.”

The incident highlighted the complexities of hosting within the WWOOF framework. While Grace remained committed to the principles of cultural exchange and collaboration, situations like this forced her to reconsider how she balanced trust with caution. It also highlighted the emotional weight of hosting, as one negative experience could ripple through her future interactions. Grace’s reflections demonstrated the delicate balance required to uphold the ideals

of WWOOFing while protecting her well-being and maintaining the integrity of her farm as a welcoming space.

Despite the challenges she faced, Grace remained steadfast in her commitment to creating meaningful experiences for her volunteers. Over time, her hosting practices evolved as she navigated the balance between her ideals of collaboration and the practical realities of running a farm. In her early years of hosting, Grace's approach was characterized by openness and a strong emphasis on mutual respect and shared enthusiasm. However, as the diversity of volunteers increased and the external pressures of maintaining her farm grew, she had to adapt her strategies to manage these dynamics effectively. Apart from that, another kind of challenge Grace encountered was handling conflicts between volunteers. Hosting individuals from diverse cultural and personal backgrounds enriched the overall experience but occasionally resulted in misunderstandings or tensions. Grace approached these situations pragmatically, prioritizing harmony without compromising productivity.

“Conflicts between volunteers happen sometimes. If I sense two volunteers aren't getting along, my strategy is to assign them separate tasks in different parts of the garden. That way, they don't have to interact much. I've had situations where one person made others uncomfortable, and this approach helps avoid further tension.”

This strategy diffused potential conflicts as well as ensuring that volunteers with differing personalities could still contribute meaningfully to the farm. Grace's ability to recognize and address interpersonal issues reflected her dedication to maintaining a positive and cooperative environment, even when faced with occasional discord.

Beyond managing interpersonal dynamics, the physical and emotional demands of hosting weighed heavily on Grace over the years. Hosting required her constant engagement and

attention, leaving little time for personal rest or renewal, especially as she simultaneously shouldered the labour-intensive responsibilities of running her farm. These pressures became increasingly pronounced as Grace aged, prompting her to reflect on the toll hosting was taking on her energy and enthusiasm.

“I like meeting new people, but hosting is very hard work, and I’m getting older and more tired. For my own well-being, it would be good to have a couple of weeks with volunteers and then a break before the next group arrives. There were years when hosting was continuous, and it left me with no time for myself. It’s a big responsibility.”

Recognizing the need for self-care, Grace made the deliberate choice to introduce breaks between hosting cycles. This adjustment allowed her the time she needed to recover and manage her workload more sustainably. While this decision was rooted in practicality, it also reflected Grace’s growing awareness of how hosting had shaped her emotionally over the years.

The continuous effort to manage diverse expectations, personalities, and physical demands of her farm presented Grace with an ongoing challenge; how to maintain the same level of enthusiasm and commitment she had in her early years of hosting. Yet, she adapted her practices without losing sight of the values that first inspired her involvement with WWOOF. Grace’s reflections highlighted the complexities of hosting, where idealism often intersected with the realities of everyday farm life. Through her adjustments, Grace maintained the essence of WWOOFing as a space for collaboration and shared purpose. As she addressed, hosting came with its share of challenges, from navigating volunteer expectations to balancing the exchange of effort and learning. Yet, her farm continued to offer an environment where contributions were appreciated, and mutual respect was encouraged. While Grace’s approach evolved over time, shaped by both practical realities and the dynamics of hosting, she remained

committed to the values that first inspired her involvement. Her journey reflected the nuanced negotiations of reciprocity and effort, ensuring her farm was a space of growth for both herself and her volunteers.

Reciprocity as Mutual Benefit

This section explores how reciprocity as mutual benefit manifests in WWOOF exchanges, wherein both hosts and volunteers experience a dynamic process of shared learning and contribution. This process often aligns with the concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which posits that learning is deeply rooted in the social and cultural contexts of practice. This is not a formal, classroom-based pedagogy. Instead, it operates as an apprenticeship model where learning is embodied and emergent. Volunteers often arrive as 'legitimate peripheral participants'; they may start with simple tasks like weeding or washing vegetables, on the periphery of the farm's core operations. As they demonstrate engagement and build trust, they are gradually drawn closer to the centre, taking on more complex responsibilities like seed saving, managing irrigation, or even assisting with animal husbandry. This journey from periphery to core is central to the WWOOF ideal and similar social networks, transforming the volunteer from a temporary helper into an integrated member of the farm's ecosystem. In this sense, ecological learning within these farm settings echoes once again with what Ingold (2000) describes as "dwelling". This is the difference between a tourist viewing a landscape and a dweller engaging with a lifeworld. Farms in this context are lifeworlds, continually shaped by the relational activities of those who live and work there.

This process is exemplified by hosts like Daniel of Veridian Farm, who regards his farm as a site where forms (knowledge, relationship, identity) emerge through practice. He facilitates learning by embedding volunteers in the day-to-day farming tasks and actively serving as a facilitator of experiences. He also views permaculture as a way of being attentive to change

and a "holistic system of design" rooted in observation and responsiveness, aligning with principles discussed by Veteto and Lockyer (2008). With a smile that perhaps evoked fond memories of his hosting days, he distilled the WWOOF experience into three keywords:

“I think experience would be one of those words. And I think learning would have to be another one. And I think connection... both land and people... I think that's why I [choose it], because I was thinking the word community would be one of them, but that connection is probably a bit broader, cause some people might want to connect more with the land... some people might want to connect more with people, yeah.”

Each of these keywords points to a layer of mutual benefit. The 'experience' is the hands-on work; the 'learning' is the cognitive and embodied skill development; and the 'connection' is the profound social and ecological reward. As practiced at Veridian Farm, permaculture becomes a moral orientation where volunteers learn to “take responsibility for themselves and the economy that sustains them”. Through their engagement, I observed them subtly internalize a mindset that encourages ecological stewardship, distinct from overt activism, reflecting the enduring impact of these exchanges.

Crucially, this knowledge exchange is bidirectional. While hosts are fonts of situated knowledge, they are not infallible masters. Arthur and Julie’s farm provides a clear example of reciprocal learning in action. The adoption of scything, a traditional and efficient mowing technique, was introduced to them by a European volunteer who had expertise in the method. This illustrates how hosts are not just educators but active learners who can have their own practices enhanced and diversified by the skills volunteers bring. "We've learned a lot about people from outside the UK," Arthur reflects. "You learn a lot about their cultures and their countries." This willingness to learn is important for hosts, allowing mentorship to evolve into an effective and collaborative relationship.

One way that this cultural exchange manifests is during shared meals, which become daily rituals blending ecological symbolism with social connection. Food acts as a primary conduit for interaction; on one occasion at Valley Organic, I taught Declan, how to cook a traditional Malaysian mackerel fried rice. The process involved more than just following steps; it was a narration of heritage, explaining the significance of certain spices and techniques. He, in turn, shared his knowledge of vegetarian quesadillas, a staple from his own travels. This exchange embodies the deeper ethos of WWOOF, transforming the kitchen into a space of active reciprocity where sharing a recipe is also sharing a piece of one's personal history. As Van Esterik and Counihan (2013) argue, such "food-sharing creates solidarity," reinforcing belonging through the intimacy of shared routines and the performance of mutual curiosity.



Figure 18: Simple Meals Prepared with Fresh Produce from the Farm

A similar dynamic of cultural exchange through shared meals was also formally practiced at other sites, such as the residential community at The Bridge Institute. Here, a communal kitchen rota required volunteers from diverse backgrounds to take turns preparing meals for the entire group. Volunteers, through their participation, were able to experience how this daily chore transcended simple labour, transforming into an exercise in social navigation and problem-solving. Planning meals fostered discussions about dietary norms, budget negotiation, and deeply held culinary traditions. For instance, one evening, simple cultural contrasts in cooking habits, such as variations in oil use for frying eggs, often became points of subtle negotiation. However, such differences could often be managed by fostering understanding that

variations were cultural and offering both options (e.g., one egg with oil, one with butter) can accommodate diverse preferences. Trusting fellow volunteers with one's nourishment, especially when tastes were unfamiliar, actively tested the community's cohesion. These repeated, sometimes challenging interactions integrated learning about new spices or cooking methods with navigating different cultural worldviews, establishing the kitchen as a crucial space for reciprocal learning.

However, for an agricultural project to provide the space and resources for such culinary and cultural exchanges to occur, it must first be sustained through constant physical effort. Based on my observations hopping from one farm to another for almost two years, it became evident that the foundation of this entire system is the tangible trade of labour for provisions. Hosts provide accommodation, which can range from a caravan to a room in the house, and food, which typically consists of produce from the garden supplemented by staples. In return, volunteers provide the essential labour required to sustain the farm. The necessity of this labour is dictated by the demanding seasonal rhythm of small-scale organic farming, a cycle that is relentless. The year begins with the flurry of spring, which involves preparing soil, turning compost, and sowing seeds. This preparatory phase quickly gives way to the peak of the gardening season in summer, a physically taxing period of constant weeding, watering, pest monitoring, and harvesting. As Daniel described, it's a repetitive cycle, "Weeding, hoeing, planting, harvesting, weeding, hoeing, planting, sowing seed... just goes on and on and on", that requires significant manpower and endurance. The intensity continues into autumn with the main harvest, alongside preparations for the coming cold. Even the comparatively quieter winter is not a time of rest, but a critical window for maintenance and infrastructure projects that are too disruptive to undertake during the main growing season.

I recall this intensity firsthand from my time at The Green Plot in February, building two large compost bins alongside Grace and another volunteer, Phil. "This is the kind of job I just can't

manage alone," Grace commented, "and having reliable help to get it done before the spring rush is essential." The sense of shared accomplishment after completing such a strenuous task often transitioned seamlessly into shared celebration. As we were collecting our tools, the day's labour "done and dusted" as Phil put it, Grace asked what we would like for dessert after our tea. Phil cheerfully shouted from the back, "I'd like a pancake for my desert! With strawberry jam." The jam in question was Grace's own organic preserve, made from strawberries grown in the very garden we were working to support.



Figure 19: Building Compost Bins at The Green Plot

This moment perfectly encapsulates the ideal of mutual reciprocity and brings to mind the Malay proverb: "*tidak rugi berbudi kepada tanah, kerana tanah tidak tipu*", which translates to "it is never a loss to do good to the land, for the land does not deceive". The proverb's power lies in its application of '*budi*'- a term for virtue, kindness, and noble character typically reserved for humans to the non-human, land. It reframes the act of farming as extending moral consideration to the earth, treating it as a relational partner. The second part of the proverb, "the land does not deceive," contrasts the earth's honesty with human fallibility. While people

may betray kindness, the land offers a true return on sincere effort. This philosophy of treating the land with *budi* mirrors the ideal of WWOOF itself: the belief that extending generosity, trust, and sincere effort, whether to the soil or to a fellow human, will ultimately yield a just and honest return, moving the exchange beyond the purely functional to encompass care, celebration, and a sense of familial connection.

These interactions built on bidirectional learning, rich cultural sharing, and a clear, needs-based exchange of labour for provisions exemplify the ideal of mutual benefit that draws participants to WWOOF. This balanced, positive exchange forms the conceptual baseline from which to understand the challenges and complexities that arise when this ideal is not met. However, this delicate balance is not always achieved, leading to situations where reciprocity becomes imbalanced.

Unbalanced Reciprocity: Power Dynamics and Economic Pressures

While the WWOOF model aspires to create a framework of mutual reciprocity, fostering collaboration between hosts and volunteers, the practical realities of farm operations such as fluctuating labour needs, economic constraints, and differing motivations often introduce complexities that disrupt this ideal. Power dynamics, rooted in hosts' control over farm resources and daily operations, can leave volunteers in dependent roles, navigating limited agency within the exchange, even as hosts themselves often rely on this volunteer labour for critical farm operations. This inherent asymmetry, while sometimes necessary for the smooth functioning of the farm, highlights the challenges of maintaining balanced relationships within a system built on non-monetary exchange.

In addition to authority dynamics, economic pressures further complicate the reciprocity that underpins the WWOOF experience. Hosts face rising costs related to food, utilities, and accommodations, which can reshape their expectations of volunteer contributions. These

operational challenges often intersect with shifting demographics and volunteer motivations, leading to tensions that challenge the collaborative spirit of the exchange. Building on the previous section's exploration of mutual reciprocity, this discussion turns to the nuances of unbalanced reciprocity. It examines how power dynamics and financial constraints create asymmetries in the host-volunteer relationship, moving beyond the ideals of equal exchange to explore the practical realities that shape the WWOOF experience.

The dynamics of authority and dependency within the WWOOF exchange offer a rich lens through which to examine the complexities of power relations and unbalanced reciprocity. At its core, the volunteering arrangement, where hosts provide food and accommodation in return for volunteer labour, initially positions hosts as the primary arbiters of tasks, schedules, and overall conditions of the exchange due to their control over key forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Hosts typically command the economic capital of the farm itself (land, tools, produce, lodging) and often hold significant cultural capital in the form of specific agricultural knowledge and local practices. While this structural authority can lead to volunteers being reliant on hosts for sustenance and learning opportunities, it is crucial to recognize that this dependency is often mutual; many hosts, particularly on small-scale or remote farms, equally rely on volunteer labour to manage essential farm tasks and ensure operational viability. This relationship of mutual need, albeit with an inherent power imbalance frequently favouring the host who controls resources and the site, sets the stage for nuanced and occasionally fraught dynamics. Elisabeth Kosnik's ethnographic work on WWOOF highlights how such host-guest relationships can lead to a dissolution of boundaries between production and consumption, fostering inclusion while simultaneously enabling forms of social control (Kosnik, 2013). In this context, hosts often exercise this control by determining the nature of the exchange, from the specific tasks assigned and the expected labour output to the degree of mentorship and social integration offered. This power, underpinned by their capital holdings, while sometimes

essential for maintaining farm operations, also places volunteers in positions of dependency, where their learning and overall experience can be contingent upon the host's decisions and disposition.

While hosts in WWOOF exchanges often hold significant authority, volunteers also arrive with their own aspirations, frequently centered on gaining meaningful educational experiences. Declan, for instance, engaged in farm volunteering purposefully. Aiming to start his own small business after a recent inheritance, he sought 'to prepare myself with all the knowledge that I can get' for his future endeavor. Such clear expectations for skill acquisition, however, can clash sharply with host priorities or pedagogical styles, leading to frustration and a sense of unbalanced reciprocity.

The disconnect between Declan's aspirations and the reality of his experience often stemmed from the nature of tasks assigned. Instead of the immersive, skill-building experiences he anticipated, he found himself performing labour perceived as menial. Declan vividly recalled his disappointment at Valley Organic:

"It was just clearing bushes and lifting things. I didn't really learn much. I wanted to work on the organic crops, but that never happened."

This contrasted starkly with his time at a previous farm where he "got to do a lot of stuff... like learning how to build fences and... dry stone walls", experiences that had clearly set a precedent for the learning he valued. His frustration was compounded by the pedagogical approach of the host, Morgan:

"I'd like to do more, like building another structure, and actually learn how to do it, instead of just doing it (see Appendix D, Figure 6 & 7). Morgan isn't a great teacher... if you ask him why something is done a certain way, he'll just say,

'because it's like that,' without explaining further. So, I haven't really learned much. When they need my help, I'll do it, but I'm not that into it because I know I'm not going to gain anything, just lifting things. "

Declan's experience brings into focus a critical aspect of unbalanced reciprocity: the perceived denial of access to desired cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), in this instance, the practical farming knowledge, construction techniques, and underlying rationale for specific agricultural methods he specifically hoped to acquire. His labour, while contributed, was not, from his perspective, adequately reciprocated with these learning opportunities.

The host's power, manifested in controlling task allocation and the flow (or withholding) of explanatory knowledge, directly shaped Declan's experience, leading to his disengagement. Declan described a common scenario illustrating his perception of this dynamic: if he asked Morgan for tasks, he'd see a look on the host's face, and then a job would be suggested almost as an afterthought. "You know something is just coming to his head that it's not a priority," Declan explained, "It's not something that is [actually needing] doing, it's just... getting rid of people. Because he doesn't want people around there". Declan felt that many of these assigned tasks lacked genuine purpose, leading him to believe that such assignments were sometimes more about managing volunteer presence than achieving productive or educational outcomes. Kosnik's (2013) work on the host-guest dichotomy is pertinent here, as the host defines the boundaries of the learning environment. For Declan, this control meant his hopes for acquiring transferable skills were largely unmet, resulting in dissatisfaction. As Manatschal and Freitag (2014) argue, such unmet expectations frequently lead to perceptions of inequality. Indeed, when volunteers are driven by motivations such as personal growth or skill acquisition (Clary et al., 1998, as cited in Zollo et al., 2017), a perceived lack of reciprocal opportunity from the host organisation can significantly impact their commitment and satisfaction (Zollo et al., 2017). For a volunteer like Declan, this dynamic represents a significant imbalance. However,

it is important to note that these feelings of disenchantment did not negate all aspects of Declan's time at the farm (particularly moments of shared meals or composting insights), but they foreground how pedagogical authority can skew the overall sense of fair exchange.

Declan's experience of unmet learning expectations is one form of volunteer dissatisfaction. Other volunteers recount more fundamental breaches of the anticipated exchange, particularly concerning basic provisions and fair work expectations. A WWOOFing couple, for instance, shared in their vlog their experiences in Australia where the core agreement of work for sustenance broke down. They recounted an instance where they "just weren't happy" because it "was too much work and not enough food basically". The couple described an experience of severe food rationing by one host, where even a single piece of fruit like a banana was expected to last for several days, a stark contrast to the sustenance needed for demanding farm labour. Their advice to other volunteers was to "always say what you feel... and just know how to leave know when to leave when it's time to leave". This call for direct communication demonstrates an assertion of volunteer agency in the face of perceived exploitation.

The potential for exploitation was further illustrated in an online vlog by a volunteer who had participated in both WWOOF USA and Workaway placements. She recounted experiences where hosts appeared to extend work demands beyond agreed-upon limits, making her feel as though she was being "milked us a little harder than was agreed upon". Beyond excessive work hours, this vlogger also highlighted how host authority can impinge on personal freedoms. At her first WWOOFing farm, she recalled, "I was not allowed to talk on the phone I was not allowed to sing I really couldn't make any noise at all". Such restrictive rules, unrelated to farm tasks, underscore the significant control hosts can exert over the volunteer's daily life. These experiences led her to identify "the lack of security" as a key drawback, noting that hosts "can kick you out whenever they want". This lack of security and control, coupled with instances of being overworked or subjected to arbitrary rules, clearly demonstrates how the volunteer

position can become vulnerable to the host's discretionary power, pushing the exchange away from an ideal of mutual respect and collaboration towards one experienced as imbalanced and potentially exploitative.

These varied volunteer accounts from online vlogs, alongside Declan's experiences, from unmet learning needs to instances of inadequate provisions, excessive work, and restrictive environments, collectively paint a picture where the ideal of work-exchange volunteering is frequently challenged by the practical assertion of host authority and the lived realities of navigating dependency and power within non-monetary agreements.

Beyond direct conflicts over expectations or conduct, imbalance in the WWOOF exchange often arises from more subtle sources, such as simple human error and failures in communication. In these instances, neither party may act with ill intent, yet the delicate balance of reciprocity is strained. The informal, non-contractual nature of WWOOF means that when mistakes happen, the path to resolution is often unclear, relying on patience and mutual understanding rather than formal accountability. Tracie, a long term WWOOFer we discussed earlier, recalled an early mistake born from inexperience:

“I once got mixed up between Swiss chard and lettuce and planted the wrong thing out... next to my peers.”

Though a minor error, the incident made her acutely aware of the burden placed upon hosts. She reflected, “I can see that for some farms, having volunteers who don’t know very much is actually hard work. Because you have to explain everything to them.” Her insight highlights the volunteer's awareness that their own learning process can inadvertently create extra work for the host, tipping the exchange into a temporary state of imbalance.

This challenge was echoed perfectly by Matt, the host at the same site, who described the consequences from his perspective. He recounted a time when a simple miscommunication led to a significant loss of produce:

“It did not work very well because of my miscommunication... I might not have explained very well and then I turn around and they’ve harvested the wrong bed, all of it. But then that’s next week’s produce and I just have to give it to the pigs. And because I’m not paying them, it’s not employment. I can’t really enforce anything.”

Matt's reflection powerfully illustrates the host's dilemma. The informal structure that makes WWOOF accessible and non-hierarchical also removes the typical mechanisms of accountability found in employment. The loss of an entire crop bed represents a significant material imbalance, yet the recourse for the host is limited. These examples demonstrate how the blurred boundaries within WWOOF mean that reciprocity is fragile, depending less on formal obligation and more on the constant, careful, and sometimes flawed process of communication and negotiation.

These narratives of volunteer dissatisfaction find their counterpoint in the challenges faced by hosts when volunteer actions or attitudes disrupt the reciprocal balance. Hosts, in turn, must navigate how to manage volunteers who may not share their vision for the exchange. Arthur and Julie provided a compelling illustration of the nuanced power dynamics in hosting seasoned volunteers, particularly in their encounters with what they term “professional WWOOFers.” These individuals, often older and more experienced in the WWOOFing circuit, adopt a nomadic lifestyle, moving between farms as their primary way of living. Julie elaborates:

“There are some what we call professional WWOOFers. They tend to be men and they tend to be a bit older. They tend to be maybe in their 30s, forties, or even a bit older. And that’s what they do. There’s not many of them, but that’s their life. They just go around WWOOFing all the time.”

While these volunteers bring self-sufficiency and potentially valuable embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of farming skills or extensive WWOOFing know-how, their pronounced independence can sometimes disrupt the structured routines and social expectations hosts rely on to maintain order and a cohesive farm culture. Arthur, reflecting on this dynamic from his perspective as a host, noted that while many such individuals are "perfectly fine and even exceptional contributors," their presence can generate more challenges than expected. He observed that, based on broader discussions within the WWOOF community regarding host experiences, these long-term WWOOFers "probably represent a disproportionate number of the complaints," suggesting a pattern of friction. This tension between the autonomy of "professional WWOOFers" who may prioritize their established way of WWOOFing over adapting to each new host's specific culture, and the authority of hosts highlights a critical paradox. Although their expertise could theoretically enhance farm operations, a perceived reluctance to integrate fully, or to readily accept the host's established practices without question, can create friction. Julie further observed the "unanchored existence" of these volunteers, describing how they often “don't have a home” and are simply moving from one WWOOF place to another. This dynamic, as Arthur and Julie perceive it, reveals a potential underlying vulnerability in the volunteers' reliance on host-provided economic capital (shelter, food), yet their extensive experience might also afford them a different form of agency compared to novice WWOOFers. For Arthur and Julie, managing this subset of volunteers requires striking a careful balance: accommodating their independence

while ensuring the farm's collaborative ethos and their own roles as directors of their specific farm environment are respected.

This dynamic shows that hosts' authority is not limited to assigning tasks but also shapes the farm's social and cultural environment. As explored in Grace's detailed case study, this authority became an essential tool for navigating the evolving aspirations of WWOOF volunteers and negotiating reciprocity. She reflected on how shifts in participant demographics, with some volunteers arriving seemingly to pass the time or meet language requirements rather than engage with farming affected the perceived fairness of the exchange. Grace recounted deep frustration with disengaged participants, such as the volunteer who primarily used the farm as a base for job hunting while contributing little, an experience that particularly upset her so much because she felt her hospitality was being abused. These growing disconnects between some volunteers' expectations and the collaborative ideals of WWOOF pushed Grace to exercise her authority by imposing stricter boundaries in her hosting practices.

For instance, to mitigate the impact of such negative experiences and preserve her own resources and well-being after years of continuous hosting that left her with no time for herself, Grace made the deliberate choice to introduce breaks between hosting cycles. Furthermore, when faced with interpersonal conflicts between volunteers, she adopted a pragmatic strategy of assigning them separate tasks in different parts of the garden to 'avoid further tension' and maintain farm productivity. Such experiences, especially when trust was severely breached, had a lasting impact. Reflecting on a particularly challenging incident with a volunteer who exploited her hospitality and then faced an unhelpful response from the WWOOF organisation itself.

The profound discomfort, born from a sense of violated reciprocity and a desire to avoid future exploitation, highlights the necessity for a more guarded approach. Consequently, while she

initially embraced hosting as an open opportunity for mutual learning and connection, the increasing presence of participants whose actions strained the exchange forced her to prioritize the farm's operational needs and her own sustainability. This shift towards a more managed and bounded form of engagement reflects the broader challenge of sustaining reciprocity in volunteer settings. It represents a host actively using their power to redefine the terms of exchange, moving towards ensuring a more balanced reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972) after experiencing interactions that leaned towards the negative or exploitative. Such adjustments, born out of necessity, highlight how hosts' logistical priorities and personal capacities often conflict with, and must adapt to, the varying levels of commitment and diverse needs presented by volunteers.

The challenges for hosts extend beyond direct exploitation or miscommunication into more nuanced and taxing forms of imbalance, stemming from mismatched abilities and, most significantly, the profound emotional toll of caregiving. Grace, for instance, recounted the significant strain of managing these mismatches. She recalled an instance where a volunteer's undisclosed back condition prevented them from performing essential weeding tasks, significantly disrupting the farm's schedule during a critical period and placing undue stress on her operations. This illustrates how the dependency of hosts on volunteers for operational continuity can quickly become a source of frustration when volunteer capacity does not meet the farm's needs, creating an immediate imbalance.

Over time, hosts like Grace and Daniel found that this burden extended far beyond logistics into the realm of substantial emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Daniel acknowledged that hosting often demanded far more than he and his partner Beatrice had initially anticipated. Beyond teaching farming skills, they frequently found themselves unexpectedly addressing the personal and emotional challenges of their guests. Daniel recounted one particularly draining incident of having to:

“...sit down and pretend to be a psychotherapist with somebody... listen to absolute trauma from their lives for two hours.”

He was acutely aware that he lacked the skills for such a role and that the volunteer needed "serious help" the farm could not formally provide. Grace's narrative powerfully complements these insights. She found that managing interpersonal complexities, including cultural differences and, notably, accommodating volunteers with significant mental health needs, became intensely taxing. She candidly described this difficulty:

“I think the worst is [when a WWOOFer is] mentally ill and has great difficulty dealing with life. And they can often be really difficult people to have as a guest. And then you can get exhausted by it. You want to help the person, but you don't know how, and it puts you in quite a difficult position.”

This assumption of a caregiving role, often without adequate training or support, represents a significant and largely unreciprocated emotional investment by the host, further tilting the balance of the exchange. At times, tensions among volunteers also necessitated Grace's active intervention, such as assigning separate tasks to avoid conflicts. These cumulative demands, both practical and emotional, inevitably reshaped her hosting approach, reinforcing the stricter boundaries and clearer upfront expectations detailed in her case study.

Taken together, these experiences from both volunteer and host reflections highlight the fragile balance and inherent precarity in striving for mutual benefit within the WWOOF model. While volunteers often arrive with diverse aspirations, hosts like Grace and Daniel must frequently prioritize their farm's productivity and their personal well-being. This frequently leads to cycles of misaligned expectations, resulting in a perceived or actual state of unbalanced reciprocity for one or both parties. As noted by Vantilborgh et al. (2011), unmet expectations in volunteer settings are akin to breaches of the psychological contract and often lead to

dissatisfaction. This highlights the need for clear communication and realistic goal-setting. However, as the power dynamics inherent in the host-volunteer relationship suggest, even with clear communication, achieving and maintaining genuinely balanced reciprocity also necessitates ongoing negotiation, mutual adjustment, and a critical awareness of the often-unspoken labour (including emotional labour) involved in the exchange.

Complex Reciprocity

Declan's experience at Valley Organic as we just explored illustrates the fluidity of volunteer participation in WWOOF contexts. While his frustrations with Morgan's unstructured teaching style led to perceptions of unbalanced reciprocity, other interactions with Matt and fellow volunteers offered moments of learning and connection. Rather than inconsistent, these contrasting experiences reveal the layered nature of WWOOF engagements, where pedagogical, relational, and symbolic exchanges may diverge across time and task. Reciprocity in this sense extends far beyond straightforward labour-for-accommodation exchanges, shaped by economic pressures, timing, and evolving relationships. Hosts and volunteers, as we established our understanding, enter these exchanges with diverse aspirations and expectations. Yet, the realities of farm life often challenge these ideals. The dynamic nature of these interactions highlights a potential shift from idealistic mutual learning to more pragmatic and utilitarian forms of reciprocity, shaped by factors such as the timing of labour demands, the pressures of small-scale organic farming, and the adaptability required from both parties. "Pragmatic" here refers to exchanges shaped by immediate practical needs and operational realities, emphasizing efficiency and adaptability over idealistic aspirations, while "utilitarian" perspectives, according to Davies and Olivier (2016), frame relationships in terms of achieving beneficial outcomes like productivity and sustainability.

It is crucial to distinguish this 'complex' reciprocity from the 'unbalanced' reciprocity discussed previously. An unbalanced exchange occurs when the implicit social contract between a host and volunteer is breached, causing that specific relationship to become strained or disrupted. In contrast, complex reciprocity emerges from the system itself, creating challenges even when individuals are acting in good faith. A volunteer who stays for their agreed-upon two weeks, for instance, has fulfilled their promise; the relationship is not technically unbalanced. The complexity arises from the pattern of this transient engagement. The host must constantly invest time and energy training new individuals, only to lose that investment as soon as the volunteer becomes efficient. As noted earlier, such investment is also a form of anticipation, shaped by the very hopes that influence how experiences unfold but not always matched by outcomes. In this context, the problem is not the individual, but the inherent inefficiency of a system reliant on high turnover.

Within this framework, the tension between immediate operational demands and the longer-term goals of sustainability and personal growth reveals the challenges embedded in the WWOOF model. Here, altruistic intentions and pragmatic necessities are not always easily reconciled. While building upon the foundational understanding of reciprocity as a dynamic and culturally situated process (Sahlins, 1972; Deng et al., 2020), this section focuses on how such exchanges evolve and are constantly recalibrated under systemic pressures. It is within this fluid and multifaceted context that the truly 'complex' nature of WWOOF reciprocity emerges, demanding continuous adaptation from both hosts and volunteers.

Apart from the power dynamics previously explored, my fieldwork revealed another significant layer of imbalance within WWOOF exchanges: the substantial financial and logistical burdens often placed upon hosts. These burdens directly challenge the ideals of mutual reciprocity and collaboration that underpin the network. The economics of WWOOFing are multifaceted as volunteers typically bear their own travel costs to and from the farm, visa expenses if

applicable, and any personal spending money for toiletries or off-farm activities. Hosts, in turn, are generally expected to provide food and accommodation. However, beyond the produce from their own land, this often involves purchasing staple foods, covering utility costs (water, electricity, heating, internet), maintaining volunteer accommodations, and investing considerable unpaid time in training and supervision. For many hosts, particularly those on small-scale or aspiring self-sufficient farms, these cumulative economic investments and logistical adjustments can place considerable strain on the sustainability of their participation, sometimes reshaping their relationships with volunteers as operational needs and financial pressures overshadow the ideals of shared learning.

Daniel's experience at Veridian Farm provides a striking example of this financial burden. "We were spending about £5,000 a year just on food for volunteers," he explained. "We could provide vegetables from the garden, but we still had to purchase a lot of other items". While this expenditure was manageable initially, Daniel noted it became unsustainable over time, forcing a reevaluation of his capacity to host under the traditional WWOOF camp model. He humorously pointed to a specific dietary staple of many young, short-term international volunteers as a contributor to these costs: "A lot of very young people. You know like... 18, 19 year olds. They, they eat a lot of biscuits, you know". For many small-scale farms like Daniel's, this financial strain, compounded by such cumulative costs for purchased provisions is not unique and can represent a broader pattern where the direct and indirect costs of hosting outweigh the perceived benefits of volunteer labour. These financial challenges highlight a critical tension within the WWOOF network, which often operates on the implicit assumption that hosts can readily absorb the costs of participation without significant external support or remuneration. McIntosh and Bonnemann (2006, p. 91) support this, noting from their research in New Zealand that such grassroots systems may not adequately account for the financial realities faced by hosts, particularly those operating on limited resources or without significant

off-farm income. This WWOOF camp model contrasted sharply with the later shift to local 'Garden Ninjas,' who, as Daniel explained,

“They’ll be staying in their own homes. They’ll have their own breakfast at home... They’ll often bring bits of lunch to share, even though we will give them some lunch as well... So all of those costs that we used to do around breakfast and dinner and issues around bedding and tents, we do not have anymore, all gone.”

This transition to local volunteers, who often contributed to their own sustenance, significantly reduced the direct financial burden on Veridian Farm, illustrating a more economically sustainable, albeit different, model of volunteer engagement.

This reliance on volunteer labour, especially during peak periods, often leaves hosts with little choice but to prioritize immediate practical needs over broader goals. However, the transient nature of many volunteers (including those using platforms like WWOOF or Workaway) complicates the notion of balanced reciprocity. While participants contribute valuable labour and gain experiential knowledge (Wengel, 2018; Nordbø et al., 2020), their temporary presence can introduce significant operational inefficiencies. Daniel’s reflections highlight these challenges, noting how the constant turnover of volunteers strained resources and disrupted the flow of work. The need to retrain newcomers frequently impacts productivity and detracts from the continuity of farm operations. As he stated:

“If you have a lot of people who come here for just two or three weeks, then every time somebody new arrives, you’ve gotta show them. How do you do this? How do you do that? There’s quite a lot of just training around that, and then somebody just learns where that is, where this is, and then they leave; they’re gone. So we have to start going. So very inefficient. Not actually, you know, that’s... you give a lot of work out to get some work back”.

Moreover, the short-term commitment of many volunteers means that deep, lasting connections are not always forged, or are simply difficult for hosts to maintain given the high volume of people. Daniel candidly admitted this relational challenge:

"I have to say a whole load I can't even remember their names. I know, I'm sorry.

I have had some people come up to me and say, hey, we came to see you like 12 years ago for two weeks. I'm just like. Sorry, I can't remember your name. You look vaguely familiar".

Similarly, Grace observed that for many volunteers, a placement is transient; they "just see it as part of their experience" and "move on," making long-term engagement unlikely. This perspective from long-term hosts highlights how the very structure of WWOOF, while fostering diverse encounters, can inherently limit the depth and longevity of many interpersonal relationships, leading to a kind of *episodic relatedness* where connections are meaningful but fleeting. This, in turn, can result in inconsistencies in labour quality and knowledge transfer, potentially undermining the long-term sustainability of implemented practices (Deville et al., 2016). For instance, high turnover can hinder the accumulation of skills and familiarity with specific farming techniques, reducing the effectiveness of volunteer contributions. Such operational shortcomings are a well-documented negative impact within volunteer tourism, leading to direct 'disruptions to work progress' for host communities (Guttentag, 2009; Gilfillan, 2015).

These practical challenges often lead to a complex tension for hosts. On one hand, they desire the "fresh energy" and readily available labour of new, short-term volunteers, which is particularly useful for peak times despite the training inefficiencies. On the other hand, there might be a preference for more "professional" or long-term volunteers who, while potentially more skilled and autonomous, could also bring their own set of challenges regarding

integration, as discussed with Arthur and Julie. This host dilemma, balancing the immediate need for labour against the costs and complexities of different volunteer engagement models, signals a shift toward utilitarian perspectives. Here, operational needs and the pragmatic management of resources often take precedence over idealistic aspirations of deep cultural exchange or prolonged mutual learning with every volunteer. The "return on investment" for training time becomes a critical, if often unspoken, factor in the complex reciprocity of these exchanges.

Layered upon these systemic pressures of logistics and finance, emotional dynamics further deepen the complexity of reciprocity within WWOOF. Interpersonal interactions are not static but often adjust in a reactive manner based on perceived attitudes, levels of engagement, and contributions. Hosts face the dual burden of managing both logistical challenges and the emotional labour of fostering connections with a transient population. For volunteers, the emotional tenor of their relationship with hosts is equally critical; positive interactions characterized by warmth and mutual respect can inspire deeper engagement and a sense of shared purpose, while distant or directive attitudes from a host may lead them to feel undervalued, reducing their investment in the exchange. This reciprocal dynamic reveals how moods and attitudes can shape both the immediate and long-term outcomes of the host-volunteer relationship. These emotional dynamics are further amplified during the demanding peak seasons; the same relentless seasonal rhythm of small-scale organic farming discussed previously creates periods of heightened stress that necessitate a shift toward utilitarian priorities, where efficiency and output dominate interactions. These conditional reciprocities demonstrate how the balance of giving and receiving is constantly renegotiated, influenced as much by intangible emotional factors as by the tangible demands of farm life.

When such conditional reciprocities become a source of sustained strain, drawing on the cumulative weight of mismatched expectations and the significant emotional labour detailed in

the *Unbalanced Reciprocity* section, hosts may be forced to move beyond reactive adjustments towards a more profound, strategic adaptation. Grace's decades-long experience as a host offers a clear lens on this long-term evolution. While her early motivations emphasised cultural and ecological exchange, the recurring realities of managing volunteers with diverse levels of commitment, and navigating the emotionally demanding situations that arose, necessitated a profound recalibration of her hosting philosophy. Hosting, she found, often became an exercise in endurance. The pragmatic adaptations she made, such as being more selective with volunteers and introducing personal breaks from hosting were not simply reactions to isolated incidents. Rather, they demonstrate complex reciprocity as an active, ongoing process of strategic adaptation, where a host must consciously reshape the terms of engagement to ensure their own survival within the network.

Yet, the narrative of complex reciprocity is not solely defined by challenges and pragmatic shifts. The model also allows for relationships that evolve in deeply positive and layered ways, a trajectory best illustrated by the experience of Rachel, a local volunteer whose journey I was able to observe over an extended period at Veridian Farm.

Rachel's situation was unique, as she embodied a bridge between formal WWOOFing and local community support. She explained to me that she had been a WWOOFer in the past, so when she heard Veridian Farm worked with volunteers, it "got me interested." Her motivation was specific and practical: having recently acquired her own allotment nearby, she wanted to learn more from the hosts to apply to her own project. This personal goal shaped her engagement; she committed to coming at least once a week, and I observed her immerse herself in foundational tasks like composting and planting. Over several months, this consistent, goal-driven participation facilitated a distinct transition, a change she articulated when reflecting on her journey:

“It wasn’t just about learning how to do one thing, like how to plant something properly. When I started, I just wanted to learn from them, but after a while, I realized I wasn’t just learning tasks anymore. The real change was feeling like, ‘Okay, I can actually do this myself now.’ That confidence is what let me take on my own allotment and know I could make it work. But I still come here and learn. Sometimes I get seeds from Sophie, sometimes topsoil”.

Crucially, this autonomy did not sever her ties to the farm; she maintained her connection, proudly identifying as one of the 'Garden Ninjas.'

This observed evolution highlights the transformative potential of sustained interaction, where initial exchanges of labour and knowledge deepen into relationships marked by mutual growth and trust. While categorized within complex reciprocity, Rachel’s narrative demonstrates that such exchanges do not necessarily oscillate between positive and negative outcomes. Instead, her story illustrates a trajectory of reciprocal engagement that consistently fosters enrichment, moving from one phase of positive outcome (gaining technical skills) to another (achieving greater autonomy while maintaining community ties). Unlike exchanges characterized by extractive or imbalanced dynamics, Rachel’s experience reflects how complex reciprocity can sustain and amplify mutual benefits over time. Her story aligns with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning, which emphasises how competence and identity are cultivated through active participation in a community of practice. In Rachel’s case, the Veridian Farm environment served as both a training ground and a supportive network, allowing her to develop the confidence and expertise needed to expand her ecological endeavors independently.

These diverse observations, from hosts grappling with seasonal pressures and the emotional weight of care, to volunteers navigating learning curves and evolving their engagement like

Rachel, reveal that reciprocity within WWOOF is not a static or uniform concept. It is a dynamic, constantly negotiated process shaped by myriad factors including economic realities, the temporality of agricultural cycles, individual motivations, emotional labour, and the very real power imbalances inherent in the host-volunteer relationship. These overlapping influences generate a layered set of interactions that challenge any simplistic understanding of reciprocity as merely a labour-for-accommodation exchange. Instead, reciprocity within WWOOF emerges as an evolving phenomenon, continuously responsive to the needs, capacities, and ethical considerations of its participants. By viewing these exchanges through the lens of complex reciprocity, the tensions between idealistic aspirations and pragmatic necessities come into sharp focus. Understanding these exchanges as embedded within a 'mixed economy of volunteering' acknowledges that WWOOF is neither a pure gift economy nor a straightforward labour market, but a hybrid space where altruism, learning desires, labour needs, and social connection intermingle and often collide. The sustainability of such volunteer networks may well depend not just on individual adaptability, but on fostering more structured support systems, promoting clearer and more reflexive communication about expectations from all parties, and developing a greater collective acknowledgement of the diverse values, unspoken labours, and inherent power dynamics at play. Central among these unspoken expectations is the practice of care, an ethic that is fundamental to enacting sustainability and will be the focus of the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER 7: CARE AND SUSTAINABILITY IN ECOLOGICAL PRACTICES

I remember sitting with Isabel in Veridian Farm's improvised kitchen, a structure made of greenhouse plastic, warm and bright, even though it was still early in the day. Back in Guatemala, the idea of working for free was foreign, she said, and volunteering to gain experience was something she hadn't experienced before. "You don't work for free in my country." She explained: "I couldn't believe I had to give my time for free, with no pay, just to gain experience and possibly get a job, because in Guatemala, there is no concept of volunteering like that." At first, volunteering was not a choice for Isabel but a necessity and a practical step toward employment.

"I worked very hard for no pay. It was what you had to do to get experience," she said of her early years with a local conservation organisation. But over time, her perspective started to change. She came to Veridian Farm because she could volunteer on her own terms, something she had never felt before.

She reflected: "Now I come here by choice, and it's a joy."

Ecological Engagement and the Practice of Care

In this chapter, I examine WWOOF as a social network that encourages care for the environment and for those who nurture it. Here, I return to the framework of a social network of ecological practices to show how WWOOF guides participants toward a form of ecological citizenship steeped in practical tasks, ongoing learning, and moral reflection on human-non-human interdependencies.

The guiding perspective for this analysis emerges from theoretical insights on care, particularly as articulated by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). Rather than framing care as an affective or abstract ideal, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) encourages us to view care as a set of situated, attentive practices that continually shape ethical obligations and relationships. Her work is situated within feminist Science and Technology Studies and develops care through sustained dialogue with technoscience, feminist ethics, and environmental thought. In *Matters of Care* (2017), she does not present a single ethnographic fieldsite, but instead advances care through speculative and experiential engagements with practices such as soil care, permaculture, and knowledge-making, foregrounding maintenance, attentiveness, and more-than-human obligation. Her focus is therefore not on care as affective disposition or interpersonal morality, but on care as a situated, material practice that sustains worlds over time. In this chapter, I draw on her work as a sensitising framework rather than a model to be directly applied, re-situating care within the everyday ecological labour of WWOOF farms, where care is enacted through soil management, plant cultivation, and volunteer–host relations. Within WWOOF, care manifests both in explicit acts of stewardship: daily crop tending and patient soil nurturing and in the subtle negotiations and moral considerations woven into everyday farm routines. Care, in this sense, is deeply embedded in practical encounters and sensory engagements. This perspective aligns with scholarly discussions of ecological citizenship, which emphasise that

environmental responsibility arises from the incremental and situated ways individuals and communities inhabit their worlds. As Dobson (2004) argues, ecological citizenship is based on non-contractual responsibilities that arise from the ethical consequences of everyday life. This includes how individuals respond to environmental harm they may cause, even unintentionally, and how those responsibilities extend across space and time. Barry (2006) builds on this by framing sustainability citizenship as a lived ethical practice, grounded in embodied responsibility and care. These insights resonate with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) proposition that care is not merely a sentiment or virtue, but a relational and more-than-human practice: an ongoing negotiation of obligation that unfolds through practical entanglements with soil, species, and others.

Alongside its focus on care as a practical and relational ethic, this chapter also engages broader frameworks that connect ecological practice to systemic change. Among these frameworks, the concept of food sovereignty, as articulated by movements like La Vía Campesina, emphasises the right of communities to control their own food systems, grounded in core values such as ecological sustainability, social justice, and cultural integrity. Adaptive resilience aligns with the everyday practices of care observed on these farms, where permaculture principles and volunteer engagement intersect to nurture both the land and the social relationships that sustain it. Scholars such as Agarwal (2014) and van der Ploeg (2014) have highlighted how food sovereignty involves navigating tensions between local autonomy and global interconnectedness, between collective rights and individual freedoms. These tensions mirror the complexities faced by participants in these farming contexts, who balance ideals of sustainability with practical constraints. Thus, while the focus here remains on care as an embedded, lived practice, these practices simultaneously echo broader struggles for ecological justice and autonomy: an undercurrent of food sovereignty that enriches the ethical landscape of ecological engagement.

Of course, as earlier chapters have shown, care within WWOOF is not always mutual or evenly distributed; some hosts have struggled with the complexities of managing volunteers, while some participants have faced unmet expectations or limited support. Acknowledging this, the chapter views care and sustainability as contingent rather than guaranteed values. They emerge in practice and can become fraught forms of engagement. By placing care at the centre of ecological citizenship, this chapter therefore avoids framing sustainability as a fixed system of abstract “pillars” and instead explores how participants come to understand it as a lived reality.

This exploration brings into view a set of interconnected dimensions that link knowledge-sharing, affect, and advocacy. For example, online platforms provide spaces where participants can connect. A widely circulated Reddit post titled “After WWOOFing for 5 months...” offers both cautionary tales and practical strategies, creating a space for peer-to-peer support that extends the network’s capacity to advocate for sustainable practices across geographically dispersed communities.

This prompts the central inquiry for the chapter: how do the demanding ethics of care and the messy realities of sustainability truly come together, or pull apart, within the daily life of this ever-evolving community?

Intergenerational Care and Knowledge Transfer: Building Ecological Belonging and Responsibility

The idea that the transfer of agricultural knowledge in WWOOF involves more than an exchange of techniques is central to this section. It acts as a conduit for intergenerational care, where practical experience and environmental ethics are passed on through co-presence, attentiveness, and repetition. Such transfer reflects a pedagogical intention that is intertwined with a broader ethic of ecological belonging, where values are embedded in the rhythms of shared work. As we have explored, Tim Ingold's concept of "dwelling" offers a mode of knowing that emerges from immersion in place and practice. Similarly, Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of situated learning helps frame how newcomers come to participate in farming tasks through the process of joining in, observing, failing, adjusting, and gradually becoming attuned to the work and the land.

This process is guided by a clear philosophy of hosting, which is best articulated through what can be understood as a *three-tiered ethic of care*. This framework, which emerged from hosts' own descriptions of their responsibilities, is clearly explained by Arthur in his own words:

"I think we do have a number of rules. The first rule is we need to make sure the WWOOFer is comfortable, is looked after, and is safe. And well, that's the most important thing; their safety and well being. The second thing is that we want to provide a good experience, and we try and provide a variety of tasks. And if possible, and depending on the WWOOFer's motivation, we also try and provide some tasks that they hopefully would learn from. If they have particular interests or aspirations, we try and provide tasks that will be useful to them in the future, insofar as that is possible within the constraints of what we also need to do".

Arthur's testimony provides us with the blueprint for the ethical structure, which can be visualized as a three-tiered framework of care that moves from the essential to the aspirational. The framework is built upon the foundational first tier, *Fundamental Care*. This represents the host's non-negotiable obligation to ensure a volunteer's safety and material well-being. It is the practical expression of Arthur's assertion that the volunteer's welfare is "the most important thing," encompassing not just safe tools and tasks, but also adequate food, comfortable lodging, and a secure environment. Without this solid base of trust and security, no meaningful exchange can occur.

Building upon this foundation is the second tier, *Experiential Care*. Here, the host's focus shifts from provision to curation, actively working to make the volunteer's stay enjoyable and engaging. This involves offering a variety of tasks that provide a holistic sense of the farm's rhythms and ensuring the volunteer feels their contribution is valued. It is the difference between simply assigning labour and fostering a positive, memorable experience.

The peak of the framework is the third and most transformative tier, *Pedagogical Care*. This level is reached when a host takes an active and intentional role in a volunteer's personal development. It involves aligning farm tasks with a volunteer's stated interests and future aspirations, transforming shared work into a site of deep, situated learning, as theorized by Lave and Wenger (1991). This commitment to mentorship elevates the WWOOF exchange from a simple transaction to a potentially life-enhancing experience, fulfilling the deepest promise of the ethos.

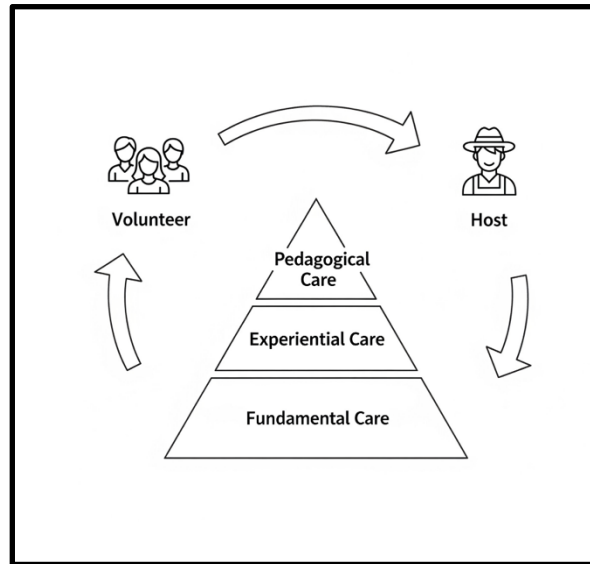


Figure 20: A Framework for Intergenerational Care and Reciprocal Knowledge Transfer

(Author's synthesis, based on Arthur's insight).

This three-tiered framework was clearly evident in practice at Oakhaven. However, the flow of knowledge there was often more complex than a simple host-to-volunteer transfer. Let's take scything in Oakhaven as an example. Arthur described how he now teaches this skill, focusing not on brute strength, but on guiding a volunteer to feel the rhythm of the tool and work with the land's contours. This scene, of the experienced host mentoring the novice, appears to be a classic example of pedagogical care.

Interestingly, the story of how scything was first introduced at Oakhaven reveals a powerful moment of 'reverse mentorship.' In his own words, Arthur explained that the skill was originally brought to the farm by a WWOOFer:

"But you do occasionally have people who come with experience... We had another woman, who still is one of the people who comes back occasionally called Ruth, who was very keen on scything, and really, she taught us how to scythe. She got us going on scything, and now we use scything quite a lot to manage the field..."

I think if she hadn't come along and talked to us about scything and showed us, we probably wouldn't have done that. So that's been useful".

This account demonstrates a complete cycle of situated learning: a skill introduced by one volunteer becomes embedded in the farm's own culture and is then passed on by the hosts to the next generation of WWOOFers. It is the clearest example of how intergenerational care is defined by the reciprocal exchange of experience. This two-way exchange at Oakhaven is not unique; other hosts also speak of relationships that transcend simple instruction to create profound and lasting bonds. Grace, for instance, recalled one such experience where a volunteer's contributions went far beyond practical help:

"I had one, a German lad, and he was absolutely brilliant. He was a WWOOFer but he came the week I was moving into this house. He was a big strong lad, so that was very good, and he could do anything. I mean, he could do plumbing, he could do electrics, he could do joinery... he was just so brilliant. And he's still a friend, I've been over to Germany and stayed with him. He came for two weeks but he was just fantastic. It just makes such a difference when you get somebody who's really, you know, engaged and enthusiastic, and it just lifts your spirits."

This particular instance of unexpected help highlights the breadth of contributions volunteers can offer. Grace's approach to farming itself also embodies this deeper ethic of care and intergenerational knowledge transfer. At Grace's smallholding, this care took an intensely tactile form. One Saturday morning, we went to an allotment newly acquired by her colleagues in Bridlington, where she demonstrated her sheet mulching method, carefully layering sods, weeds, and kitchen scraps while working alongside volunteers. "You flip the weeds upside down so they rot into the soil," she explained, "then cover it with cardboard, straw, whatever you've got. It's slow, but it works."

Rather than disturbing the ground through digging, this approach involved covering, weighting, and leaving materials in place over time. Care, in this context, was enacted through patience and restraint: protecting the soil surface, allowing decay to unfold gradually, and accepting that regeneration happens slowly rather than immediately. Grace's approach exemplifies a kind of careful resourcefulness, where soil is treated as a living collaborator rather than a substrate to be controlled.

Additionally, she also cultivated comfrey, harvesting it both for her own compost and to share as organic fertilizer with neighbours. These modest but deliberate choices involved avoiding machinery, relying on local inputs, and reusing what others might discard. Together, they conveyed an ethic of ecological sufficiency, grounded in long-term attentiveness rather than efficiency metrics. Care here was directed not only toward volunteers' learning experiences, but toward maintaining the conditions under which soil, plants, and productive life could continue over time. The philosophy of dynamic, cross-cultural synthesis is physically embodied in the very tools Grace uses, such as the Jembe, an East African hoe from her time teaching in Tanzania, which serves as a powerful symbol of a lifetime of learning and adaptation (see Appendix D5).

"People think sustainability means high-tech solutions," Grace once said. "But it's also just using what's already here wisely, respecting what the land gives you." Her words echoed the practices I saw across WWOOF sites: slow, layered, and deeply situated forms of teaching and learning that emphasised responsibility over productivity.



Figure 21: Sheet Mulching Method Used to Improve Soil Fertility Naturally

In all these cases, knowledge transfer was not a linear process. It required hosts to invest emotional energy and volunteers to situate themselves in unfamiliar routines. At the same time, it involved learning how to work with soil, plants, and seasonal rhythms in ways that prioritised protection and care over speed or output. This process requires learning new physical skills while also adapting to unspoken social cues and different paces of work. While the success of this exchange varied depending on each volunteer's attunement, it created a space where environmental responsibility was not only communicated, but materially enacted through practice.

This model of intergenerational care, rooted in practice rather than prescription, strengthens the WWOOF network's capacity to reproduce ecological values. It demonstrates how sustainable farming is passed on as a way of being-with, rather than as a simple technique. Through shared routines and adaptive mentorship, hosts like Arthur, Julie, and Grace embed their ethics in the everyday by how they work, guide, and respond.

Yet, as we shall continue to discuss, these examples of practical instruction do not represent the full range of care relationships within WWOOF. Closely linked with the transfer of practical skills is the work of maintaining emotional well-being. As the next section will explore, this form of care is shaped by differing host capacities, shifting volunteer expectations, and the emotional labour often required to keep these arrangements running.

Emotional Care and Well-being

In the context of WWOOF, personal care often intertwines with ecological care, reflecting a holistic understanding of well-being where self-care and environmental care reinforce one another. Many participants initially engage with WWOOF as a way to make healthier choices for themselves; this engagement often extends into a broader ecological ethic as they experience the interdependence of personal and environmental well-being. This process aligns with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) understanding of care as a multifaceted and material practice that actively shapes ethical commitments toward both human and more-than-human worlds. For many volunteers, by cultivating their own food, they gain a sense of control over their diet, transforming personal health into a practice of ecological care.

Take the case of Tracie, who has been a WWOOFer for about 20 years and whose key motivation is companionship. For her, the tangible and often meditative nature of farm work became a powerful form of therapy. She actively cultivated this therapeutic experience as a form of self-care. Her commitment to protecting her own well-being directly shaped her choice of farms, leading her to deliberately seek out smaller, more relaxed environments where the labour itself would be restorative:

"I quite like weeding actually. Yeah yes, because you can't really do it wrong. You can see a difference at the end of the day. I generally go to smaller places, not

big, commercial farms. Often the works are more varied. It's not just weeding a big field. It's often more relaxed I think."

Tracie's approach to emotional care was also deeply relational, prioritizing long-term connection over novelty. She deliberately built deep, trusting relationships with hosts, a strategy that shaped her entire WWOOFing practice. She explained:

"I tend to go back to the same places. I find other volunteers, usually younger than me, so I haven't got to know them that well. So, in a sense, I tend to make friends with the host rather than the volunteers. I think some hosts are glad to have company, so they don't mind explaining things. Once I know someone well enough I don't have to do it through WWOOF. I may just contact them directly."

In these quiet exchanges, Tracie found an ethic of mutual recognition that extended beyond the formal boundaries of work. Companionship, she emphasised, was often as important as the labour itself. This transactional model demonstrates Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) idea that everyday practices of care can function as quiet but powerful interventions. Tracie chooses smaller, more relaxed farms because they support her well-being and offer companionship, making the relationship itself a meaningful part of the experience, not just a way to earn lodging.

Of course, Tracie was not naive about the limits of WWOOF. Her own positive experiences were balanced by a critical awareness that the system of care is fragile and not guaranteed for everyone. Her awareness speaks directly to the themes of unbalanced reciprocity and power dynamics explored in the previous chapter. By acknowledging these risks, Tracie demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the WWOOF network. She recognizes that the reciprocal ties she cultivates are not a given, rather, they represent a deliberate and fortunate outcome within a system that can also produce exploitation.

"Well, most of the hosts I've been to are fairly relaxed, but I have heard stories. Farmers who see the WWOOFer as just cheap labour. My Italian friend came to do WWOOFing here... they were housed in a very leaky caravan. And had to start work at 7:00 o'clock... she felt she was just being exploited."

This awareness of potential exploitation underpins her entire strategy of returning to known, trusted hosts, framing her approach not just as a preference, but as a deliberate act of risk management. Her critical perspective, however, is not one-sided; she also spoke with great empathy about the challenges hosts face. This dual awareness of volunteer precarity on one hand, and host burdens on the other, is what shapes her unique position. It leads her to seek relationships not with fellow volunteers, with whom she notes a generational gap, but with the hosts themselves. Most importantly, her entire WWOOFing practice can be seen as a carefully constructed project of personal renewal, built on a realistic understanding of the network's risks and rewards.

Tracie's experience is not unique in this regard; the pursuit of personal renewal is a common thread that runs through many volunteers' journeys. As host Julie astutely observed, many volunteers arrive at a pivotal moment in their lives:

"I think a lot of people who go WWOOFing are at a point of transition in their lives. Something happened. Maybe they finished a relationship, or they finished a course, or their job has finished. Something happened to them, and they're looking for the next thing. And they think WWOOF will give them the answer. Sometimes it does".

Julie's insight provides a crucial context for understanding the journeys of volunteers like Garry and David. Garry, a former electrician, came to Valley Organic after leaving a forty-year career. He described reaching a point of deep professional dissatisfaction that prompted a search for a

completely new direction in his life. For Garry, this career change marked an existential shift, rooted in a search for spiritual connection and a desire to "give something back." He explained:

"It's a good match. It's very practical, you're getting your hands dirty and I quite like getting hands dirty. I feel that I'm giving something back to the planet. So I think it works for me on a spiritual level as well... To be working on the earth makes me feel closer to what I think of as God, a supreme being. A deity, yeah".

Garry's words underscore how ecological engagement, for some, offers more than therapeutic calm; it evokes a spiritual reckoning and a return to forgotten forms of reverence. His embodied routines at the farm resonated deeply with Dobson's (2004) idea of non-reciprocal responsibility, the notion that ecological care is not transactional but morally rooted in justice and obligation toward the more-than-human world.

A similar story of seeking refuge from burnout was shared by David, a local volunteer at Valley Organic whom we discussed earlier. Like Garry, David had come to ecological volunteering as a response to burnout and emotional fatigue. He found the routines of working life stifling. "Working with animals and feeling the sunshine on my back... it's like a mental reset," he recalled, describing how the physicality of farm work helped him process stress. His volunteering journey began from an instinctive need to slow down and reconnect with something elemental. He spoke openly about the fragility of emotional support in temporary spaces, referencing difficult moments with other volunteers and hosts. At the same time, he found in permaculture a kind of moral anchor, calling it "a noble quest." David's perspective adds nuance to how emotional care circulates within the exchange, revealing it is not always structured or guaranteed.

Alongside the drive for individual well-being, the sense of community that develops on these farms further reinforces the relationship between personal and ecological commitment. Isabel's

experience during the pandemic highlights the significance of communal support in maintaining emotional resilience. A biologist and long-term conservation volunteer, she began coming to Veridian Farm during the first UK lockdown, describing it as the first place where she could “volunteer by choice” and feel welcomed without pressure. Reflecting on her arrival, she explained:

“I started in April 2020... What made me start to be here was lockdown. Veridian Farm was able to keep working through lockdown... and I was here next Tuesday. And since then, since 2020, I have been coming almost every week.”

Her stay extended across multiple seasons, and the farm gradually became both a refuge and a community. Although the cultural and ecological significance of communal eating was explored in detail in the previous chapter, it is worth noting here how this exchange at Veridian Farm, with these food-sharing practices functioned as a form of emotional care. For Isabel, preparing and sharing meals provided a way for her to feel grounded, supported, and momentarily at home. As she recalls:

"I might have started to come. Through lockdown to get away from my house, but I discovered. That every lunchtime through lockdown when people were being locked in their houses, not being able to see anybody. I was here in Veridian Farm and we were having lunch and we were a community of people and I could socialize. And I was thinking, this is heaven when everybody else is being locked in their houses."

Additionally, the lifestyle rhythms fostered within ecological volunteer settings often lead participants toward a more mindful, health-oriented way of living. The slower pace of life on organic farms, coupled with an emphasis on self-sufficiency and minimalism, fosters a daily rhythm focused on well-being. Volunteers who adopt this slower, simpler lifestyle frequently

report a stronger sense of connection to nature, as well as a more grounded sense of personal contentment. This shift reflects a growing awareness that sustainable living can promote not only ecological health but also personal health, creating a feedback loop where each reinforces the other. In this way, practices of emotional care are not separate from sustainability; they are embedded within it.



Figure 22: Declan Connects with Nature After Farm Tasks

Yet this emotional atmosphere also places new demands on hosts. At Daniel’s farm, Beatrice observed that volunteers now often arrive with a desire to help. However, they also frequently bring complex emotional needs. “They come here with stuff,” she explained gently, referring to grief, anxiety, burnout, or mental health challenges. Hosts, once focused primarily on ecological teaching or task management, now find themselves navigating emotional support roles, requiring patience, empathy, and an evolving set of interpersonal skills. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p.171) invites us to query, “Is it an affection? A moral obligation? Work? A burden? A joy?” These overlapping and sometimes contradictory dimensions of care capture what Beatrice described as a “delicate balance,” one that stretches the time, energy, and emotional boundaries of hosts who are themselves living minimally. The growing expectation

of emotional labour, never part of the original WWOOF model, was among the reasons Veridian Farm stepped back from formal hosting altogether, with this shift occurring just before the pandemic.

These dynamics reveal how WWOOF's ethos of shared care is both rewarding and uneven. While volunteers often find personal healing through ecological immersion and communal living, the emotional demands of care are not distributed equally. Some hosts embrace these expectations; others struggle to maintain their own well-being under the weight of continuous relational labour. In contexts where public support systems are absent or overstretched, farms sometimes become informal care spaces by default, without being designed or resourced to carry that role. Yet not all sites fit neatly within the WWOOF model of host-volunteer reciprocity. As the next section will explore, the complexity of care becomes even more pronounced in hybrid arrangements like The Bridge Institute, where roles are blurred, expectations are unevenly communicated, and the ethics of responsibility are shaped more by necessity than by ideological commitment.

Case Study: Tensions in Mediation — Elias and Louis at The Bridge Institute

At The Bridge Institute, a residential NGO and educational campus in northeast England, the experience of WWOOF volunteers unfolds in the shadow of broader institutional dynamics. Among the WWOOFers who passed through the site, Louis, a French university student spending a gap year in the UK to improve his English arrived with modest expectations: "I didn't choose the place for the farming aspect... I just wanted to improve my English and it was a place to be in England." His interest in gardening was secondary, but he was open to learning. The realities of daily life at The Bridge Institute, however, would soon reveal how complex and ambiguous roles could shape volunteer experiences.

The most striking figure in this dynamic was Elias, a long-term resident who had originally arrived through an international volunteering program and ended up staying at The Bridge Institute due to travel disruptions during the COVID pandemic. Although not a WWOOFer himself, Elias had informally taken on the role of coordinating the garden and managing volunteers, a responsibility that fell into his hands more by circumstance than design. As Clara, the official WWOOF host, put it: “Elias learnt everything from the previous gardener who left. He’s been working and helping and learning and growing.” Over time, he became the de facto lead for outdoor work. “He is the one now who knows the most,” Clara explained, “and he’s very efficient. So I guess he became the reference.”

Yet this quiet delegation also shifted the centre of responsibility and relational care to someone with no formal preparation for the emotional or pedagogical demands of hosting.

But this redistribution of authority had unintended consequences. Elias was not involved in the WWOOF programme directly and had little exposure to its ethos of mutual exchange, voluntarism, and educational immersion. Clara herself, who used to be more involved in WWOOF placements, acknowledged the shift: “I try to deal with things like that more by email... When I meet the volunteers at the beginning, I make sure they have what they need.” Her role became more focused on accommodation and meals, leaving the coordination of garden work in Elias’s hands. The result was a division between formal hosting and informal supervision, one that blurred responsibility and sometimes led to tension.

“He was very angry sometimes,” Louis recalled, describing moments in the garden where Elias’s communication style became difficult to manage. “He was not very understandable because I don’t speak English very well. So it was hard to understand what we had to do. And if we did something wrong, he would get upset.”

These frictions reflected a deeper breakdown not just in roles, but in the affective atmosphere of the site, where expectations and responsibilities were poorly communicated, and emotional responses intensified in the absence of shared frameworks.

Caught between wanting to stay out of trouble and not fully understanding what was expected, Louis described an atmosphere where volunteers absorbed tensions without being able to resolve them. It was not just a breakdown in communication, but a breakdown in care, where relational expectations went unspoken, and emotional labour remained unacknowledged.

“I didn’t want to have problems,” Louis admitted. “So I didn’t really ask for help or anything. I just waited for the time to go.” He spent much of his time in his room, later reflecting simply: “Not a lot of contact. It was OK.”

The ambiguity around Elias’s role: not quite a host, not quite a peer, became a source of strain. Although Clara continued to see the WWOOF programme as aligned with The Bridge Institute’s mission, “It’s a good exchange... they are coming to help, but they also get something back”, the on-the-ground reality became more complex. Elias’s authority in the garden, while efficient, was not accompanied by the communicative or ethical framing that volunteers might expect from a host familiar with WWOOF values. The relational tone shifted. “He has so many things to do and he’s not always available to explain. So sometimes he gets frustrated,” Louis said.

In this layered setting, the tensions weren’t rooted in overt conflict or mistreatment, but in the quiet disjunctures between ethos and implementation, intention and interpretation. Elias’s rise as a self-taught, self-positioned authority highlighted how informal labour roles can eclipse the principles of mutual exchange, while Louis’s strategy of quiet endurance illustrated how volunteers may absorb the emotional costs of unclear roles without resolution. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us, care is not always harmonious or idealized. It is often 'a troubled,

ambiguous, and ambivalent doing.' It is shaped by its complexities. Care, from Elias's perspective, was one thing, and from Louis's, it's another. In this context, care became something less mutual than structural, distributed through necessity and institutional gap-filling rather than a shared ethos. Rather than a practice grounded in reciprocity, the work of managing volunteers, sustaining routines, and carrying unspoken emotional labour fell unevenly on individuals like Elias, whose authority was improvised rather than supported. The case exemplifies how the ethics of care, when detached from communication and clarity, may mutate into obligation, frustration, and fragile endurance.

Digital Advocacy and Embodied Sustainability

By the time I conducted fieldwork, WWOOF's online presence had become inseparable from its everyday operations. These digital encounters do not replace hands-on agricultural work, but rather enrich it by circulating knowledge, deepening understanding, and connecting people who are unable to meet face-to-face. Volunteers can observe experiments in natural pest management from another continent, learn about crop rotations that have proven effective under unfamiliar climatic conditions, or find encouragement from reading about someone else's setbacks and subsequent recoveries. In these virtual settings, participants form a collective intelligence that continuously adapts and refines ecological approaches, applying lessons learned in one corner of the world to challenges emerging in another.

Within this virtual milieu, feedback loops, primarily manifested in the form of reviews, play a significant role. Although simple in format, as explained by Arthur, these reviews have a cumulative effect on how volunteers perceive the network's opportunities. One might think of these digital responses as a form of symbolic currency, "tokens," as I would describe them, small yet meaningful indicators that certain farms offer thoughtful guidance, equitable working conditions, or truly meaningful exchanges. Unlike ephemeral comments that vanish without a

trace, these recorded assessments contribute to the network's collective memory. As Arthur explained how they rely on this feedback:

"We keep a guest book. It doesn't really have comments we rely on for comments. We rely on reviews. So we encourage Wolfers to post reviews. Probably, probably about half of them really."

Over time, they help shape the informal standards by which participants judge prospective placements, anchoring a sense of continuity and trust. Rather than stepping blindly into unfamiliar situations, volunteers enter a community held together by layered strands of recognition and accountability, guided in part by these enduring signals of credibility and care. At the same time, these platforms also offer a mode of agency, allowing volunteers to shape discourse, voice concerns, and participate in the informal governance of the network.

Although I cannot quantify how many volunteers I worked with who were actively engaged in these digital spaces, the influence of online platforms was nevertheless present in subtle and indirect ways. Some WWOOFers I met, particularly younger ones, spoke about discovering host farms through Instagram or peer recommendations. Others were proud to share their experiences online, presenting their WWOOFing journeys as lifestyle choices interwoven with travel, values, and identity. Grace, among other hosts, also pointed out that digital platforms have dramatically shaped the visibility and accessibility of ecological volunteering, especially for those who come from urban, digital-native contexts.

Furthermore, the emotional resonance of these digital connections can be equally significant. Online channels let volunteers and hosts express hopes, frustrations, and small triumphs that unfold behind the scenes of daily farm work. Reading a post about someone struggling to keep crops alive during an unexpected drought, or watching a short video of a volunteer's careful grafting technique, can elicit empathy and renewed resolve. This sense of solidarity reassures

those who might otherwise feel isolated with their difficulties, reminding them that others have faced similar obstacles and found ways to move forward. Such glimpses into the lived realities of others transcend mere data points, infusing the network with understanding that encourages persistence. In turn, the emotional support gleaned from these exchanges can influence practical outcomes, inspiring participants to adapt methods, refine their problem-solving strategies, and reaffirm their dedication, not as a lonely struggle but as part of an unfolding collective endeavor.

One particularly rich example of this kind of informal advocacy comes from a widely circulated Reddit post titled “After WWOOFing for 5 months straight in 6 countries, here is my advice for beginners.” Written by a solo British woman, the post balances emotional honesty with hard-earned insight. She describes WWOOF as “beautiful and brutal,” warning future volunteers to be wary of romanticised expectations while still holding space for connection and learning. She shares stories of being “treated like a live-in maid” or working 115-hour fortnights, but also moments of beauty, growth, and small joys. One line stood out: “LEAVE if you’re unhappy.” It was echoed by others in the thread, some hosts, some volunteers, who thanked her for saying what they had been afraid to admit. These comment threads became a site of mutual validation, where others shared tips, frustrations, and encouragement.

This kind of digital dialogue performs what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) might describe as a speculative ethics of care. This approach is rooted in staying with the trouble, rather than neat solutions. The Reddit post doesn’t reject WWOOF outright; it calls for accountability while preserving the value of connection. Its comments form a kind of peer-to-peer repair work: recognising exploitation, sharing strategies to set boundaries, and helping others feel less alone. Other online narratives push further still. For example, Žoldoš’s (2016) blog post recounts a disturbing experience on a Costa Rican WWOOF farm that marketed itself as eco-sustainable

but operated more like a wedding venue dependent on volunteer labour. Despite idyllic marketing and glowing online reviews, she describes sleeping on a mouldy mattress, suffering from untreated health issues, and being overworked without learning any of the promised agricultural skills. Žoldoš highlights a key contradiction: while WWOOF advertises cultural and ecological exchange, it can mask exploitative conditions behind romanticised digital imagery. Her decision to speak out was shaped by frustration with the silence, of which she notes that few volunteers leave critical reviews, often out of guilt, fear of retaliation, or emotional exhaustion.

While WWOOF platforms do include a mutual review system, several volunteers I spoke with admitted feeling reluctant to post critical feedback, even when their experiences were negative. These formal mechanisms, though functional, are sometimes constrained by politeness, social pressure, or the fear of damaging reputations. In contrast, platforms like Reddit or blog-based media like Matador Network provide more open-ended spaces where volunteers can narrate ambiguity, frustration, and ethical doubt in ways that are less filtered and more affectively expressive. In this way, Žoldoš's account goes beyond the personal as it becomes a public act of care for future volunteers, demanding that the organisation do better. These platforms also offer forms of agency that extend beyond feedback: they allow volunteers to reclaim narrative authority, shape communal norms, and engage in informal advocacy that is both emotional and strategic. This aligns with Horst and Miller's (2010) argument that "giving voice" involves creating the conditions where people are heard and listened to, which is how a "voice acquires value," rather than simply providing the technology to speak.

Over time, these digital environments have nurtured a fluid form of networked collaboration. This collaboration is, however, uneven, emotionally loaded, and shaped by differing degrees of access and visibility. The content shared, such as stories, images, suggestions, and feedback,

travels widely, though not always evenly. This enables participants to identify common themes and differences that inform their practices. From these themes and differences, certain farms, for example, may emerge as models for efficient irrigation under specific conditions, while others become reference points for innovative composting techniques or cautionary tales of miscommunication. Hosts who read about inventive approaches employed halfway across the world can experiment with them locally, while volunteers preparing for their next placement may adjust expectations and prepare with greater nuance and emotional realism.

This diffusion of experiences, while valuable, is also shaped by affective tone and platform logics. It creates a feedback loop where on-the-ground action informs online discourse, which then shapes future action elsewhere. However, not all voices are equally amplified. As these discussions unfold, it becomes evident that ecological engagement extends beyond physical tasks on the soil. Intellectual curiosity, moral judgment, creative problem-solving, and personal commitments all play roles. The stories volunteers tell about the farms they have worked on, the hosts who mentored them, and the seasons that tested their perseverance extend beyond the fields to influence how others conceive their involvement.

Through such sharing, a volunteer's difficult morning weeding invasive plants or a host's careful decision to rotate crops for long-term fertility can guide future participants. However, these accounts remain partial, situated, and emotionally inflected. Rather than idealising uniformity or consensus, the networked exchange acknowledges that methods and values can vary, and that meaningful solutions often emerge through open-ended dialogue. As volunteers and hosts share what they learn, confront difficulties, and adapt techniques from afar, they help maintain a broader, evolving conversation, sustained primarily by knowledge, trust, and careful navigation.

Case Study: From Idealism to Breakdown

WWOOF is often seen as a form of alternative travel that promotes cultural exchange, learning, and sustainable living in contrast to conventional tourism (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007). It offers a hopeful departure from the extractive norms of mass tourism and precarious gig work. Its appeal rests in the promise of meaningful exchange: travellers gain hands-on experience in organic farming while hosts benefit from help with cultivation, chores, or construction. For prospective WWOOFers, the experience is often framed in language that evokes harmony, learning, and care, living close to the land, eating well, and forming cross-cultural relationships built on mutual respect.

This utopian framing is readily found in digital content, where YouTubers and vloggers often present WWOOF as both adventure and ethical lifestyle. Jeff Yentzer, a health-focused volunteer and regular content creator, captures this ethos vividly. “You meet fun and generous people... you eat fresh, organic living food that you just picked out of the garden,” he beams, as he stands in a sunlit vegetable patch. For Jeff, WWOOFing is not just affordable travel, but it’s also a way of embodying wellness and community. The vision he conveys, abundant gardens, shared meals, laughter and learning, has come to represent the aspirational core of what WWOOF is supposed to be: a decentralised ecology of care.

It was precisely this vision of intentional simplicity and ecological reciprocity that drew Timothy Ward to WWOOF in early 2015. At the time, Timothy was in a moment of profound transition: unmoored, introspective, and actively seeking a life less entangled with urban stress and routine. The prospect of WWOOFing, from trading labour for room and board while learning to grow food and live sustainably offered a soft landing into this uncharted life. It gave form to his desire for structure without rigidity, community without obligation, and purpose without conventional employment.

And yet, beneath his enthusiasm lay a quiet apprehension. “I was super nervous,” he admitted, not just about the logistics of travel, but about the deeper uncertainty of who he might become in this new phase. That nervousness led him to start close to home, selecting a host farm in Northern Florida that promised organic produce, animal care, and opportunities to learn about sustainable agriculture and homestead life. It struck the right balance: close enough to feel safe, far enough to feel transformative.

His initial arrival at the farm brought a sense of cautious optimism, especially when the host generously picked him up from the bus station, a significant gesture for someone traveling without a car. The accommodations were decent and the initial hospitality, though understated, felt reassuring. There was, however, a small detail that gave him pause: a laminated list of strict, oddly specific house rules taped to the bathroom wall. “That was my first indication that things might be a little... whatever,” he shrugged. But still, he resolved to give it a chance.

The next morning began with the unpleasant task of cleaning six concrete dog kennels. With no orientation or discussion, the work felt immediately misaligned with his goal of learning about farming. It was the work of a kennel hand, not an aspiring grower. This was followed by a meagre breakfast of “just like two pancakes... or cereal.” Beneath his humour about the situation was hunger. The first cracks in the ethic of care had begun to appear, stemming from an absence of nourishment and reciprocity.

As the days went on, it became increasingly clear that Timothy’s time on the farm would not resemble the immersive agricultural learning he had envisioned. The work he was assigned consistently failed to align with the agricultural learning he had signed up for. Instead of cultivating the land, he found himself performing unrelated chores and maintenance. In his own words, he explained the frustrating reality of the labour:

“He had a greenhouse and we redid the greenhouse, we rebuilt a shed, we cleaned the kitchen, like we did a deep-clean on the kitchen. My point is we ended up doing very little organic farming and more like... just stuff he didn't want to do. I don't wanna say slave labour, but he was basically using me as just like a helper, or someone to do all the stuff he didn't want to do around his house and on his property. [He] had me doing like carpentry work which I hate, just all this other stuff, and very little farming”.

He emphasised that he wasn't afraid of hard work, but there was no pedagogical structure or shared plan. The more the days passed, the more it became clear that his labour served the convenience of the host, not any mutual vision of care, sustainability, or knowledge-sharing.

By the third week, a visit to the local farmers' market became the most troubling part of his experience. This was where he discovered the host's business was not what it seemed, a moment that marked a complete collapse of the WWOOF ideals of honesty and sustainability. Timothy described the ethical breach he witnessed:

“He was going to non-organic farms down the road, buying produce, and using this to fulfill his obligation to the people for organic foods. So when I saw that, I really flipped out... He's getting 100, 200 dollars a months from these people... and he's not even growing the stuff. He's telling people, 'Yeah, it's expensive because I have to buy this certain fertilizer and all this and it's all organic'... and it was stuff he's just picking up from one of his buddies down the road who had a huge farm... It was a big scam”.

This deception is a clear case of "greenwashing," where the language and aesthetics of sustainability are used to mask unethical or non-ecological practices. The host leveraged the cultural capital associated with "organic" to secure income from his CSA members, while

completely betraying the principles of trust and transparency that underpin such schemes. For Timothy, this was more than just a lie; it represented a profound corruption of the very values that had drawn him to WWOOF. His disillusionment was now rooted in being made complicit in a false performance of ethical farming.

The host's exploitative behavior was further evidenced by the treatment of a second WWOOFer who arrived during Timothy's stay. She was immediately cast into a domestic role based on what Timothy perceived as a sexist logic. He recounted:

"Another lady showed up while I was there and she ended up leaving because he was like, 'Oh, you can do all the cleaning and the cooking'... like seriously, he was like that sexist. He's like, 'You can do all the cooking and the cleaning, and me and Tim will do all the working outside.' And so he had her like cleaning the kitchen and cooking all the meals... she was like, 'I didn't sign on for this. I came out here to work on an organic farm.'... He had her just like being a housemaid or something like that. It was crazy".

The woman's departure was sudden and unceremonious. Her quiet exit made clear for him that when the WWOOF arrangement fails to align with care, learning, or reciprocity, there may be no formal resolution; there is only the silent withdrawal of those who can afford to leave. As his time at the farm dragged on, this ordeal led Timothy to reflect on his own discomfort and on the broader vulnerability of WWOOF volunteers. He realized that others might not have even his limited support network, leaving them potentially stranded.

The ethical discomfort deepened when the host mentioned his next volunteers, girls from France. "I just felt so bad," Timothy recalled, wishing he could warn them. "I know he was gonna have girls doing all kinds of craziness and not what they signed up for." There was no

mechanism for alerting future volunteers, and no internal system of red flags or accountability. That absence haunted him.

When Timothy eventually left, he had a clear sense that his experience needed to be shared, driven by responsibility rather than bitterness. He still believed WWOOFing could be a "great program" but emphasised his story was a "cautionary tale." For Timothy, speaking out served as an act of self-repair and an offering to others, a way to support fellow travelers navigating the porous boundary between idealism and exploitation.

Digital Testimony and Ethical Reckoning

Timothy's story, grounded in firsthand experience, offers more than an isolated grievance. It highlights how easily volunteer-based arrangements can blur into systems of unpaid labour, particularly when expectations are mismatched, oversight is minimal, and exit is difficult. His reflections echo broader critiques voiced by commentators like Alice Cappelle, whose video essay on working holidays, including WWOOF, Au Pairing, and voluntourism examines how these programs often operate under the illusion of cultural exchange while masking deeply asymmetrical power relations.

In her words, such schemes frequently "replicate gig economy dynamics": short-term, precarious labour presented as opportunities for self-development, self-sacrifice, or ethical adventure. She observes that platforms like WWOOF often fail to treat volunteers as workers or participants with rights. Instead, they are cast as eager young travelers, idealistic, replaceable, and too inexperienced to question uneven exchanges. "We do not trust young people," she states. "We don't see them as workers, but as lazy teenagers," a framing that makes it easier for hosts or institutions to sidestep questions of fairness or accountability. Her critique highlights what Timothy's story reveals. Without safeguards, the language of care and sustainability can be easily co-opted. It is used to attract labour while deflecting responsibility.

Timothy's story, including his discomfort, his concern for others, and his impulse to warn, demonstrates how a care-based ethos can unravel when reciprocity is replaced by manipulation. It points to the fragility of a system that depends on good faith yet lacks safeguards when that faith is broken.

While Timothy's experience reveals how WWOOF arrangements can falter, other volunteers describe meaningful, even transformative encounters, especially when their expectations align with host practices. In her advice-oriented vlog, Dani Hurtado offers a grounded and reflective account of her two-month stay at a vegan WWOOF host in Denmark. She emphasises that WWOOFing is not a free ride. "I don't recommend WWOOFing for those people just trying to get a free trip out of it," she states clearly. "Because it is work." For Dani, the key was carefully vetting hosts for value alignment. "I really tried to make it a priority to go to a farm that didn't eat animals," she explains, describing her satisfaction with a site that followed an all-vegan diet and operated more like a school farm.

Her preparation paid off. While she acknowledged the physical labour, she described it as enriching rather than extractive. "Dirt lives inside my fingernails but I couldn't feel happier," she wrote in a journal entry she later read aloud in her vlog. The quiet, the stillness, and the connection to place made her feel both grounded and inspired. Her reflections highlight a version of WWOOFing where care is not just symbolic, but enacted through holistic engagement.

Similarly, Jeff Yentzer's upbeat video portrays WWOOFing as a continuous thread in his nomadic lifestyle. "I've known people that have traveled the country doing WWOOFing... they go from place to place, get a place to stay, food to eat... just for doing the WWOOFing," he says. His tone is consistently enthusiastic. "Wherever I've been, it's been amazing." Though he mentions the "luxury accommodations" as a running joke, Jeff's experience affirms the

WWOOF ideal as one of generosity, and flexibility, and for him, the balance of exchange felt fair, indeed joyous.

However, neither Dani nor Jeff romanticize the labour involved. Both acknowledge that WWOOFing requires real work and flexibility. Yet their stories suggest that when the conditions are right (when care is mutual and expectations are transparent) WWOOF can fulfill the vision that drew Timothy to it in the first place. Their voices remind us that WWOOF is a contingent system, not an inherently flawed one. It is constantly shaped by host integrity, volunteer preparation, and the social and ecological ethics enacted on the ground.

Timothy's case invites a deeper consideration of what it truly means to practise care within WWOOF. Care, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us, is not simply about good intentions or affective gestures, but it is about "the vital requirement to maintain, continue, and repair our world." It involves material support, responsibility, and an ongoing attentiveness to the conditions that make mutual engagement possible. While WWOOF often presents itself as a model of such care, Timothy's experience reveals how quickly that promise can unravel when daily realities are shaped by deception, inequality, or neglect. Timothy did not use the language of theory. But in telling his story: openly, publicly, and with concern for those who might follow, he enacted a form of digital care. A gesture of warning, solidarity, and repair. His vlog performs a kind of relational repair to the host, and to the broader community of prospective volunteers navigating similar uncertainties. His departure from the farm was an act of self-preservation. It was also a refusal to normalize manipulation disguised as sustainability. In this sense, his vlog stands as a reminder that care in WWOOF and in any ecological exchange must be more than aspirational. It must be enacted, felt, and upheld through mutual recognition, transparency, and the right to refuse when that recognition breaks down.

Ethical Dimensions of Ecological Citizenship

For many participants, engaging in ecological volunteering through WWOOF, local networks, or informal exchanges offers relief from the pressures of modern life. This includes alienation of office work, economic insecurity, and the desire to reconnect with land, labour, and community within diverse forms of exchange. They arrive not only with practical aims like learning to grow food or experiencing rural culture, but also with more implicit hopes: for meaning, for connection, for a form of living that feels less extractive. These personal aspirations often coexist with a desire to contribute actively. Over time, such aspiration may evolve into what scholars have described as forms of ecological citizenship, where environmental responsibility is framed as tangible practice, reflection, and relational learning (Barry, 2006; Dobson, 2004).

Based on my observation, most of the participants in this chapter, Isabel, Garry, Tracie, David, and others did not speak of citizenship explicitly. Most of the time, their actions and reflections echoed its core tenets. Isabel's return to the same farm across seasons, her gentle stewardship of shared tasks, and her decision to stay connected even after her immediate needs were met, all point toward a deepening sense of interdependence. Garry's description of ecological work as a spiritual responsibility and his long-term volunteering in replanting efforts outside the WWOOF system reflect a moral trajectory rooted in land-based ethics. David, too, spoke of care in subtle and embodied terms: feeling calm while feeding animals, finding rhythm in seasonal routines. These moments do not represent dramatic ideological shifts, but small recalibrations of how care and responsibility are felt and acted upon.

This ethical evolution is often quiet and cumulative, shaped by daily acts that create deep connections to land and community over time. Alessandra's reflections on her dietary shifts, a challenge to deeply rooted food traditions in response to the environmental consequences of

meat consumption, demonstrate how even cultural identity becomes a space of ethical negotiation. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us that care is not always comfortable; it demands that we remain attentive to the material, affective, and often ambivalent entanglements we inherit. In this context, ecological citizenship emerges through situated and relational forms of practice.

Following her insistence that care is always material and more-than-human, care on these farms did not stop at interpersonal relations but extended decisively to the material conditions that make food growing possible, particularly soil, waste, and processes of decomposition. Across the farms I visited, care for the environment was enacted through highly specific, routine practices that required sustained attentiveness to soil, waste, and fertility. At both Veridian Farm and Valley Organic, compost toilets formed a central part of everyday ecological labour. At Valley Organic, urine and faeces were deliberately separated: urine, high in nitrogen and salts, was treated cautiously and diverted away from compost destined for food-growing areas, while human waste was collected for long-term composting. Volunteers were taught that human faeces could be safely returned to the soil only through careful drying, ageing, and containment. Sawdust was added after each use to absorb moisture and odour and to support aerobic decomposition. For many volunteers, handling human waste initially felt awkward or uncomfortable. Over time, however, this discomfort often gave way to a growing respect for the slow, unseen processes through which fertility is regenerated. Composting, in this sense, was not simply a technical system but a moral and material lesson in responsibility, patience, and restraint.

In Puig de la Bellacasa's terms, staying with the trouble of care did not stop at intimate or uncomfortable materials, but extended into more mundane decisions about what counted as compostable, safe, or appropriate to return to the soil. Food waste composting practices further

revealed how environmental care was negotiated rather than standardised across sites. Some farms composted nearly all food scraps, working pragmatically with whatever materials were available. Others, such as Grace's farm, maintained stricter boundaries where only certified organic food waste was accepted into compost used for growing crops, reflecting concerns about chemical residues and soil integrity. Coffee grounds, packaging traces, and externally sourced non-organic food were consistently excluded or redirected to separate systems. These distinctions mattered because they taught volunteers to see waste not as a homogeneous category, but as material with different ecological consequences. Tasks such as sorting scraps, turning compost heaps, managing bedding from animal shelters, or monitoring moisture levels became acts of environmental care. Read through Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) insistence that care involves staying with material interdependence, these practices show how ethics are learned through attentiveness to more-than-human processes. Care for soil, microbes, and future crops emerged alongside care for people, but was not reducible to it; it demanded accountability to ecological processes that exceed immediate human comfort or convenience.

These forms of more-than-human care provide an important bridge between everyday ethical practice and broader political imaginaries of food and land. These everyday practices of care and ecological engagement also resonate with the principles of food sovereignty, a framework that highlights the right of communities to control their food systems, grounded in sustainability, justice, and cultural belonging (Edelman et al., 2014). As host Grace reflects on the value of the exchanges she fosters, she notes,

"One of the things I really like about WWOOF is there's no money... it's so rare now that you have an exchange where there's no money... if you can find something where it's genuinely good for both for everybody, I just think that's

really good and that's what we should be aiming for... It's not about money. But it's about mutuality."

This emphasis on non-exploitative, reciprocal relationships is complemented by a deep connection to ecological and social principles on other farms. For instance, host Daniel explains that guiding their work 'at the core of permaculture is a set of ethics, people care, earth care and fair shares'. While participants may not explicitly frame their actions in these terms, their collective efforts such as seed saving, shared meals, or resisting extractive systems, echo the core values of food sovereignty. Agarwal (2014) reminds us that food sovereignty is not a monolithic ideal, but a negotiated process that must grapple with tensions between collective and individual rights, between autonomy and interdependence. As she puts it, "There are serious contradictions between key features of the food sovereignty vision, such as between national and local food self-sufficiency; between promoting food crops and farmers' freedom to choose which crops to grow; and between collective rights and individual freedoms."

These contradictions speak to the complexities of creating systems that honor both communal well-being and individual agency. In practice, such tensions can emerge in seemingly mundane negotiations around access to seeds, tools, or shared labour, revealing deeper undercurrents of control and participation. This is evident in the ways volunteers and hosts navigate ownership of resources, knowledge, and labour on these farms, reflecting both the promises and the challenges of collective ecological engagement.

Van der Ploeg (2014) further emphasises that peasant and community-based farming systems exemplify adaptive resilience by reconfiguring relationships between people, land, and resources. In these farms, practices of care like composting, saving seeds, mending broken tools, patching polytunnels, rebuilding garden structures, are all acts of persistence and resilience. They are not simply about maintaining infrastructure, but carry the subtle meaning

of sustaining relationships with the land, with each other, and with the shared commitment to ecological responsibility. These small yet significant actions push back against the commodification and alienation often embedded in industrial agricultural systems, embodying a collective ethic of care and resistance. And reflecting on these everyday encounters, it becomes clear that ecological engagement is not just about personal ethics or environmental ideals. It is about the messy, hopeful, and sometimes difficult work of building and sustaining relationships in a world shaped by precarity and extraction. In this light, food sovereignty emerges not as a distant political slogan, but as an undercurrent woven through these practices, an ethic of care that stretches from the soil to the social, from the personal to the systemic.

Here, we need to consider how these ethical orientations do not emerge in isolation. The communal rhythms of ecological volunteering create conditions for care to be both extended and tested. The expectations placed on hosts, particularly around emotional labour and mental health, as seen in Beatrice and Daniel's account, further complicate these dynamics. While volunteers may grow into new modes of ethical awareness, they do so within uneven structures that do not distribute responsibility equally. This reminds us that care must be understood not just as an intention, but as a capacity, shaped by time, energy, and institutional context.

Placed in conversation with Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) work, the ethnographic material in this chapter complements and extends her attention to care as material and more-than-human practice by situating it within everyday agricultural labour and volunteer-based ecological work. While her analyses foreground care in relation to technoscience and speculative engagements with permaculture, the WWOOF farms discussed here show how care is enacted through physically demanding and often uneven forms of work, including soil regeneration, plant maintenance, and the emotional labour involved in sustaining volunteer–host relations. Through these varied and demanding forms of engagement, care emerges as an ongoing

negotiation of ethics, trust, and responsibility as a departure from a stable ethical stance or a fixed value. Taken together, the stories, tensions, and reflections in this chapter illustrate that care within ecological networks is never singular or guaranteed because it emerges unevenly through varied forms of engagement. Whether expressed through gardening as therapy or navigating ambiguous authority, these experiences expose the fragility of such networks where trust can erode and emotional labour is unevenly distributed. This fragility demonstrates that care itself can be stretched or constrained within the material and social limits of the farm. As the next chapter will explore, it is within this fragility and the necessity to keep going anyway that resilience and adaptation take shape.

CHAPTER 8: RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION WITHIN WWOOF

Scrolling through my phone's fieldwork photos one evening, I paused at a familiar image, a mural on the cupboard door of a caravan I had once called home during my time at Valley Organic. Katya, a fellow WWOOFer, had painted it with simple yet vibrant colours, leaving behind a whimsical scene that seemed to counterbalance the grim reality outside. In one corner of the mural, her handwritten phrase, "Don't let Covid get ya down," stood out. A quiet yet powerful reminder of resilience and shared defiance.

The sight of this mural, a little artifact of perseverance, brought me back to another memory, a conversation with Mia, who spoke passionately about the importance of saving seeds. "For me, seeds carry the memory of the place they come from," she had said. "They grow stronger each time they're saved and planted in the same soil, adapting to the specific challenges of that land." As she explained, the seeds "learned" to survive, a subtle resilience embedded within them.

This blend of recollections gave me a different way of thinking about resilience. Something that grows and adapts slowly. The mural and the seeds, in their own quiet ways, held together fragments of continuity. They didn't offer a solution, but they reminded me that meaning could still be made, even in times of disruption.



Figure 23: Katya's mural

Defining Multidimensional Resilience within the WWOOF Network

As the world grapples with environmental, economic, and social uncertainties, resilience has emerged as a central concept. It serves as a framework for rethinking how we live, relate, and sustain, extending beyond merely enduring crises. In its dominant formulation, resilience refers to the capacity of ecological or social systems to absorb disturbance and reorganise while retaining core identity or function (Folke et al., 2002; Walker et al., 2004). Critical scholars such as Cote and Nightingale (2012) urge us to treat resilience as a political, moral, and situated process, rather than a neutral descriptor. In this sense, resilience is shaped by context, power and responsibility. It is also important to note that resilience is also an expansive and analytically slippery concept, precisely because it can refer to many different objects, scales, and subjects at once. Without careful specification, it risks becoming an abstract catch-all rather than a tool for understanding lived difficulty and uneven adaptation.

For these scholars, resilience must be understood as something entangled with complex dynamics, rather than mere persistence or recovery. In this chapter, I follow that critical framing. I do so by asking explicitly: resilience of what, to what, and for whom? I do not treat WWOOF as a resilient system in itself, nor as a stable model for sustainable living. Rather, I explore how resilience was enacted, strained, or sustained across different ecological volunteer settings, focusing on the resilience of everyday farming practices and social relations, primarily in response to the disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and for those most directly involved in navigating these disruptions: hosts and volunteers. While WWOOF may serve as a connecting infrastructure, it was often not the source of continuity or adaptation. What allowed certain farms to navigate moments of uncertainty, especially during and after the disruptions of COVID-19, were foundational principles such as permaculture ethics and acts of care. While COVID-19 forms the primary empirical focus of this chapter, it is treated here as an illustrative moment through which the dynamics of resilience become especially visible,

rather than as the sole condition to which resilience is confined. These principles and acts were not always aligned with the formal WWOOF ethos, and they did not always succeed. However, they reflected a kind of relational resilience that emerged through people making do together under conditions of constraint.

Some of the appeal of WWOOF, historically, lies in its symbolic resistance to industrial agriculture. As a decentralised platform for connecting volunteers to organic farms, WWOOF offered a vision of exchange built on trust, learning, and non-market values. In this sense, it continues to carry ideological weight, representing a quieter alternative to prevailing norms. In practice, however, this ethos was unevenly shared. While some WWOOFers described their participation in terms of lifestyle transformation or environmental commitment, others joined with less clearly articulated motivations. For some, WWOOFing was a pragmatic way to enjoy practical and tangible benefits. Similarly, not all hosts saw their role as primarily pedagogical or ecological. Some relied heavily on volunteers for manual labour, or expected high output with minimal exchange or orientation. In these moments, WWOOF's idealism faltered, and the work of adaptation fell unevenly across people and roles.

These contradictions became especially apparent in the material and emotional strains of farm life. Volunteers and hosts often operated within ambiguous boundaries, engaging in complex interactions. Resilience, in this context, involved more than values. It required labour, humility, flexibility, and a capacity to live with discomfort. It could mean engaging in daily adaptations. These everyday adjustments were not grand or heroic. But they reflected what Cote and Nightingale (2012) call the lived politics of resilience, where adaptation is always partial, and where the costs and responsibilities of “keeping things going” are not evenly shared.

What made some of these adjustments possible, and occasionally durable, was the influence of permaculture. As Veteto and Lockyer (2008) argue, permaculture should be seen as a cultural

practice of sustainability, extending beyond a mere system of land management. On farms like Veridian Farm, the tasks of composting, seed saving, shared cooking, and flexible labour were expressions of dedication. These were often the quiet foundations of resilience, carried forward due to the permaculture logic that preceded or outlasted WWOOF, rather than WWOOF itself.

This chapter builds on that distinction. I do not ask whether WWOOF “delivers” resilience. Instead, I explore where resilience emerged, how it was recognised or missed, and what practices allowed people to continue amidst uncertainty. I approach resilience here as a lived, negotiated, and often fragile process, not a fixed capacity or outcome. It was rarely seamless. In fact, it was often messy, shaped by inherent complexities. It was in these moments, where people adjusted, faltered, recalibrated that something like resilience could be seen in motion.

The remainder of this chapter explores resilience across five interconnected domains: farm-level continuity, emotional and social well-being, digital adaptation, economic survival, and networked relational support. The first section begins with the case of Daniel and Veridian Farm, where WWOOF had largely been left behind, and where local networks, community engagement, and permaculture values sustained the farm’s practices, foregrounding resilience as continuity of practice beyond formal organisational support. The second section turns to the emotional and social dimensions of resilience, examining how volunteers and hosts managed uncertainty, fatigue, and well-being through interpersonal support and care. The following section examines digital forms of adaptation, focusing on how online communication and social platforms enabled continuity, coordination, and connection when physical mobility was restricted, particularly during COVID-19. The fourth section focuses on economic resilience, tracing the material strategies through which farms and volunteers navigated financial precarity, including diversification, informal labour arrangements, and shifting expectations. Finally, the fifth section draws these threads together to reflect on networked resilience: the

ways these different forms of adaptation intersected within a broader mixed economy of volunteering and care. Together, these sections illustrate how resilience emerged as a modest and relational accomplishment in WWOOFing. This resilience was fragile, improvised, and deeply dependent on the values and practices cultivated through everyday life, contrasting with a system-wide outcome.

Case Study: Daniel's Adaptation to Local Volunteers and Community Engagement at Veridian Farm

For years, Daniel, a long-term permaculture practitioner at Veridian Farm, hosted WWOOF volunteers as part of the farm's mixed model of sustainability. The exchange of labour for food, lodging, and hands-on learning brought vitality to the site, but also imposed structural strain. Hosting WWOOFers involved a regular influx of short-term volunteers, each requiring orientation, guidance, and accommodation which placed growing pressure on Daniel's overall capacity. As Daniel reflected, training new arrivals took considerable effort: "By the time you've shown somebody how to do something, I could have done the job in a quarter of the time."

While this model once supported a mutually enriching cultural exchange, for Veridian Farm it became increasingly unsustainable, especially when WWOOFers lacked long-term commitment or required intensive support. Rising food costs, the demands of constant supervision, and the lack of continuity among short-term volunteers turned what was intended as a supportive network into a logistical and emotional burden. Rather than signalling breakdown, Daniel's decision to withdraw from formal WWOOF hosting marked a shift toward a different kind of resilience: one grounded less in systems, and more in foundational relationships.

Faced with these challenges, Daniel sought a more feasible and sustainable approach to running his farm. Gradually, he shifted his focus from international WWOOFers to local community members who could offer regular help without requiring accommodations or extensive guidance. This pivot, though initially uncertain, allowed him to streamline operations. The local volunteers, Garden Ninjas, returned to their homes each day, prepared their own meals, and provided consistent, reliable assistance. As Daniel observed, this approach alleviated the economic strain, eliminating the costs of meals, bedding, and other provisions.

This shift also reflected a reorientation of values, moving away from high-turnover hosting toward long-term relational continuity. Unlike the vision of WWOOFing as intercultural exchange, the Garden Ninjas were embedded in the rhythms of local life. They brought with them human dimensions, particularly during the isolation of the pandemic, beyond just labour. These include social connection, shared emotional space, and mutual support. For many, Veridian Farm became a space of social reconnection and informal support. As Daniel explained, "They love the friendships they've formed... They seem to see each other loads." This transformation came with a different kind of demand: resilience here meant holding emotional space, not just managing seasonal tasks.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges. With restaurants closed and traditional markets inaccessible, the demand for Veridian Farm's salad crops disappeared overnight, threatening the farm's income. Rather than seeing this as an insurmountable setback, Daniel adapted by introducing direct sales through a farm gate market and expanding a veg box scheme. As he shared, "When restaurants shut down, we had too much salad... So, we started selling at the farm gate. It was a lifeline for us." These adaptations provided a critical source of income and offered the local community fresh produce at a time when food security was increasingly precarious.

However, these economic adjustments were not without trade-offs. The farm gate sales and veg box scheme required significant labour and consistency, stretching the farm's capacity to its limits. Daniel acknowledged that these changes were born out of necessity rather than strategic growth, remarking that while they kept the farm afloat, they were not sustainable long-term solutions. Resilience in this context was less about thriving and more about finding ways to make things work under challenging conditions. The Garden Ninjas played a vital role in sustaining the farm during this period, but their involvement came with its own set of challenges. For many, Veridian Farm became a sanctuary from the isolation of the pandemic, offering a sense of purpose and routine. As Daniel observed, "A lot of our volunteers said they were just happy to get out of their houses. They felt trapped, and the farm gave them a sense of... purpose again?" Yet, the emotional expectations placed on Daniel as a host were substantial. While the Garden Ninjas provided stability, the social needs during hosting WWOOFers added an emotional burden that stretched beyond traditional farm management.

Reflecting on these adaptations, Daniel does not view them as triumphs but as necessary responses to difficult circumstances. His decision to shift from international volunteers to local community members eased certain pressures but brought new challenges. The economic adjustments, while crucial, were a matter of survival rather than strategic innovation. Managing the social and emotional needs of volunteers required essential attributes.

Framed through the lens of resilience, Daniel's experience does not present a model of smooth adaptation. Instead, it illustrates what Cote and Nightingale (2012) describe as situated resilience: an uneven, relational process shaped by local context, limited resources, and affective labour. What enabled continuity was not the WWOOF network, but a deeper ethical grounding drawn from permaculture. As Veteto and Lockyer (2008) argue, permaculture operates as a cultural and moral practice, extending beyond a mere design method. This way

of living foregrounds care, flexibility, and the long view of sustainability. Daniel's adaptive responses emerged from these values, not from the structural promise of international volunteer exchange. This case highlights the importance of distinguishing between resilience as a system output and resilience as an ongoing ethical effort. Daniel's choices were not without exhaustion or compromise. But they show how small farms navigate uncertainty through partial, relational strategies drawing on what is available. This involves sustaining connection and adapting through care. His experience reminds us that resilience is built both through structures or institutions and through the daily, embodied negotiations of those working with and for others. Rather than idealising sustainability, Daniel's story invites us to pay attention to the uneven, affective, and often invisible work of keeping things going, especially when formal systems fall short. It is this quiet, often under-recognised labour that the next section takes up, turning to the emotional and social dimensions of resilience within volunteer communities.

Nature's Role in Emotional and Social Resilience within the WWOOF Network

In the threads of resilience that characterize the ecological volunteer community, the role of nature emerges as a profound element in fostering both emotional well-being and social resilience. Many volunteers described nature within the network not as a passive backdrop, but as something meaningful and stabilising, a setting that helped them feel grounded during uncertain times (eg: Isabel, David & Garry). For them, it became a shared presence that offered restorative functions. This framing highlights how the human–nature relationship was not abstract or essentialist, but shaped through embodied, everyday practices of care and participation. Rather than drawing on a universalized "need" for nature, volunteers' reflections pointed to how the farm environment offered a tangible structure for emotional stability. In the isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic, these organic farming environments provided volunteers a reprieve from stress and loneliness, allowing them to attune to the simplicity and

cycles of farm life. As Tracie described, her time spent weeding and working the land became a form of therapy, a way to anchor herself amid the turmoil of the outside world. These daily interactions with nature, Tracie noted, offered more than peace; they cultivated a sense of perseverance, which also serves as a reminder that growth persists even under adverse conditions. For these volunteers, being immersed in the land offered a therapeutic escape, where the cycles of planting, tending, and harvesting became restorative. Research supports this intrinsic connection, indicating that natural environments significantly reduce stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, enhancing emotional well-being (Hansen et al., 2017; Yoo et al., 2022). In this context, resilience lies in volunteers' emotional and social capacities, sustained through embodied routines of shared work and care.

Nature played a pivotal role in fostering social bonds and emotional resilience, offering a lifeline for many volunteers during the isolating challenges of the pandemic. On the farm, collective endeavors became opportunities for shared effort and mutual reliance, while informal gatherings like outdoor meals and bonfires created spaces for camaraderie and connection. These experiences enabled volunteers to forge enduring friendships and support networks that extended beyond their time on the farm. The natural environment further amplified these bonds by providing a restorative setting where individuals could engage without barriers, cultivating a profound sense of belonging. Amid social restrictions and emotional uncertainty, these communal interactions blended purposeful activity with the calming influence of nature, reinforcing both emotional stability and social cohesion (Ramkissoon, 2022).

For volunteers like Mia, the communal aspects of farm life offered critical support during the pandemic. She contrasted her own experience with the stress and isolation her friends and family faced, and recalled a pivotal conversation with her mother:

"I think I was really lucky because when everybody was locked down... I was listening [to] my friend and they were all stressed and I was really good. I was with my friend... stay[ing] outside... I call my mother then and I say I don't know what to do. And my mother, she say you're crazy, don't come back in Milan. Yeah, the situation is completely crazy. You cannot go out from the house... go to with your friend in the island, because if you come here you will... become crazy... I was one of the... few ones that really had a good life in that period. The others they were locked down in the house"

Removed from challenging conditions, volunteers found stability and mutual support through their shared activities. Social capital, or the networks of relationships that facilitate cooperation, was instrumental in enhancing community resilience during this time (Uphoff et al., 2013; Zareian, 2023). The network's collective atmosphere exemplified at Veridian Farm, where the volunteers formed a tight-knit group described by one host as a "core of reliable volunteers", highlighted how these bonds extended far beyond the immediate needs of the farm, offering emotional relief and a renewed sense of purpose.

As we touched earlier, Daniel observed that the farm environment often became a sanctuary for volunteers grappling with mental health challenges. Over the years, he noted an increase in volunteers arriving with complex emotional needs, a trend exacerbated by the pandemic. While the farm was not designed as a therapeutic space, its natural surroundings and communal work provided an unintended but effective refuge. The rhythm of farm life and the grounding presence of nature created a setting where volunteers could find solace and regain emotional balance. This was not framed in terms of 'nature' as separate, but as a socio-ecological practice, one where engagement with land and people offered a form of support. This dual role of nature, as a unifying force and a source of healing, underpinned the network's resilience, allowing participants to adapt and thrive. By immersing themselves in the daily tasks of the land,

volunteers engaged in a form of active mindfulness. They found strength in the cyclical patterns of nature and built a collective foundation for healing and adaptation.

While much of this emotional and social resilience unfolded through on-site routines, it is also important to consider how these relationships were shaped before volunteers arrived. Many hosts described receiving messages from potential WWOOFers that already carried emotional tone: anxieties about uncertainty, excitement about simplicity, or a desire for grounding. Likewise, volunteers often imagined their hosts and farms in aspirational terms before ever setting foot on site. These early gestures of outreach, however incomplete, formed a kind of emotional prelude, laying the groundwork for relational possibilities that would later be negotiated through shared labour and presence.

Before they arrive, WWOOFers are rarely imagined as strangers. Hosts often anticipate them through digital exchanges, reading profiles, or remembering past encounters that shaped their expectations. These anticipatory gestures position the volunteer as a prospective relation. Volunteers, too, carry imagined versions of what hosts might be like, drawn from blogs, reviews, or conversations with friends. This parallels what Amazonian anthropology has described as the potential affine: not yet kin, not yet ally, but a structurally imagined relation. As Suzanne Oakdale (2004) explains in her review of the concept, ethnographers such as Viveiros de Castro (2001) and Gow (2001) use this idea to capture the possibility for future cooperation with strangers, even if the relationship never settles into familiarity or trust.

Once WWOOFers arrive, the imagined bond must be negotiated in practice, through uneven labour and daily interactions. Some connections deepen into lasting friendships; others remain polite and functional. Many fade quietly after the stay ends. Indeed, as Arthur reflected, "most workers are one off because we've had so many, so we're not in contact with the majority of [them]. But it's only a small percentage that we've remained in contact with, and sometimes

we're in contact with them for a year or so after they come. But then [contact] kind of [fades] if they move on."

But in the routine activities, relational ties are formed that sustain emotional balance and provide micro-sites of resilience. These ties are rarely framed by participants as solidarity in the political sense. Rather, they reflect what I term as *episodic relatedness*: temporary but meaningful affiliations made possible by the farm's rhythms and vulnerabilities. As discussed in Chapter 5, I use the term episodic relatedness to describe forms of connection that are meaningful yet temporally bounded, emerging through shared situations rather than long-term permanence. In this chapter, the concept helps clarify how such short-lived relations nonetheless became sites of emotional support and resilience during periods of disruption. These relations did not need to solidify into enduring bonds to matter as their value lay in enabling people to cope, recalibrate, and sustain everyday life under conditions of uncertainty. This typology highlights how, within the distinct context of voluntary agricultural exchange, transient social connections are intentionally fostered and, despite their impermanence, contribute significantly to emotional balance and local resilience within the farm environment.

In this framing, resilience emerges through the fragile infrastructure of potential relations. It does not rely on fixed group cohesion. Volunteers and hosts become provisional allies in managing the uncertainties of ecological living. They function as companions whose presence enables things to hold, enables spirits to grow bold, however briefly. As Gow (2001) and Oakdale (2004) remind us, such partial affinities are not signs of failure; they are the social material from which collaborative life is often made. In the WWOOF context, emotional and social resilience is not sustained by deep attachment or shared ideology, but by the willingness to relate across differences, even if only for a season.

Digital Resilience and Everyday Connection

In the abrupt wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WWOOF network, like many other community-based systems, rapidly evolved its engagement with digital platforms, which quickly became temporary yet essential lifelines. WhatsApp groups, YouTube vlogs, and online forums emerged as vital digital platforms for providing multifaceted support when physical mobility was restricted. In this moment of rupture, digital tools enabled WWOOF to adapt, substituting remote communication for embodied presence. These practices demonstrated a form of digital resilience that is the capacity to reconfigure social ties and pedagogical exchange through technological improvisation.

As discussed in earlier chapters, particularly in relation to online vloggers, WhatsApp coordination, and post-COVID reflections, these digital spaces played a meaningful role in maintaining connections and shared learning during periods of global immobility. We understand and acknowledge the significance of this adaptive function. But to frame such adaptation as the core or totality of resilience risks overlooking the other, slower, and more situated ways in which WWOOF volunteers and hosts responded to crisis. Resilience, in this deeper sense, is not only about staying online or staying connected, it becomes a question of how we relate, what we attend to, and which forms of presence we choose to value and sustain.

This kind of networked adaptation reflects what Mehan and Mostafavi (2022) describe as the capacity of digital systems to support long-term social cohesion through distributed adjustment. During the pandemic, hosts such as Daniel at Veridian Farm used WhatsApp to remain in contact with past and prospective volunteers, while vloggers documented farm life in ways that extended learning beyond the fieldsite. These practices illustrate how digital infrastructures supported network continuity during a moment of rupture. At the same time, the limits of this framing became apparent in everyday farm life. While digital tools facilitated coordination and

connection, they could not account for the forms of resilience that emerged through embodied presence, shared labour, and attentional engagement with place. During fieldwork, resilience was often enacted through mundane practices: working quietly alongside others, adjusting to weather and fatigue, sharing meals, or lingering in moments of co-presence that did not require constant communication.

One such moment occurred during an afternoon of weeding at Oakhaven. Arthur and Julie were working nearby, tending to tomatoes inside the polytunnel. There was little conversation, just the rustling of plants, the soft scrape of tools, the occasional bird call from the hedgerow. Later, Julie came over to check on me. “It’s lovely out here,” she said. I replied, “Yeah... with all the wind and the birds.” She nodded, then added:

“Some volunteers come here and do the gardening, but they don’t really enjoy being in the garden. They put in their earphones, listen to music the whole time. But I think it’s better to just enjoy the moment while you’re out here. You can listen to your music later, but the wind, the birds, being in the garden... that’s something you only get while you’re outside.”

Her words stayed with me, not as a critique of music or headphones, but as an invitation to attunement. Drawing on Gibson’s notion of an education of attention (1979), as taken up anthropologically by Ingold (2000), Julie was articulating an ethic of presence grounded in learning how to notice and respond to the environment through direct, sensory engagement. In this framing, resilience did not emerge through retreat into digital connectivity or mediated distraction, but through staying with place. Attunement here involved learning to notice what the landscape affords, including wind, birdsong, and the resistance of soil, and allowing these cues to shape how one works and dwells. This form of resilience was quiet and easily overlooked, yet it mattered precisely because it offered a way of enduring uncertainty by

remaining perceptually and relationally engaged with the world at hand. Such moments reveal resilience as a cultivated capacity of attention, formed through embodied engagement rather than technological mediation.

Across other sites too, I observed this quiet negotiation between digital saturation and ecological presence. At Valley Organic, Declan once joked that his signal was so poor that he had no choice but to listen to me, the birds and the trees. Louis, during his stay at The Bridge Institute, reflected on the shift from constant messaging to sharing meals with strangers who later became close companions. Volunteers frequently carried smartphones, yet they also slipped into patterns of unplugging, not because they were rejecting technology, but because the rhythms of the farm subtly reoriented their habits. There was no formal prohibition, but there was an implicit pedagogy: time was marked by weeding, cooking, rainfall, or the sound of the lunch bell, not by notifications or screen glow.

The contrast here is not just between digital and non-digital, but between orientations to time, presence, and relation. The digital fosters expansive attributes, the garden invites grounded qualities. The former enables broad application, the latter offers experiential depth. Both have their place, but in moments of crisis, it matters which one we default to. To be clear, WWOOF's digital resilience during COVID was necessary and effective. It maintained key functions across distances. But the deeper forms of resilience I encountered were not digitised. They lived in embodied practices. These were not always profound or transformative moments. Often they were ordinary, even forgettable. But they were also formative. They trained attention toward the small, the situated, the relational.

This is why Julie's comment matters. It reframes listening as a mode of participation, and gardening as a situated act of care. She does not oppose music, but suggests that resilience in its fuller sense requires us to be in the world, not just connected to it. In that moment, standing

by the bed of chard and calendula, our conversation felt less like an exchange and more like a subtle reorientation of attention toward the present.

The pandemic revealed many things: our fragilities, our interdependencies, our thresholds for adaptation. But it also revealed that resilience is not always a matter of speed or scale. Sometimes, it is found in the ability to resist acceleration, to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016), and to reorient connection not through bandwidth, but through embodied, ethical being. The WWOOF network, with all its inconsistencies and frictions, served as a stage where different ways of relating and being present were enacted: not through abstract theorising, but through small, repeated, and deeply human acts of ecological design.

Economic Resilience through Networked Volunteer Exchange and Local Markets

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in globalized food and labour systems, significantly impacting farms that host WWOOF volunteers and rely on a steady stream of international labour. As travel restrictions curtailed cross-border exchanges, many hosts pivoted toward local labour networks and direct-to-consumer sales models. These adaptations demonstrated their ability to respond creatively under pressure and a broader commitment to sustainability and community well-being. The result was a form of economic resilience not driven by scale or efficiency, but grounded in embeddedness, where relational care, local networks, and a diversified approach to meeting immediate needs became central.

To navigate the absence of international WWOOFers, many hosts turned to nearby volunteers, reducing overheads linked to accommodation and meals. These local contributors, often part of existing social or permaculture networks, brought familiarity and consistency, minimising the inefficiencies of repeated onboarding. At Veridian Farm, “Garden Ninjas” became vital to daily operations. Their involvement ensured reliable labour and also reinforced the farm’s

social fabric by rooting it more deeply in its immediate community. Simultaneously, some hosts, including Veridian Farm, launched veg box schemes and began selling directly at farm gates. These initiatives offered lifelines for maintaining income when other distribution channels faltered, showing how WWOOF-hosting farms adapted through informal, low-barrier systems of exchange. This constellation of labour and sales pivots illustrates adaptive capacity in practice, reorganising under stress to maintain functionality, in line with resilience frameworks (Walker & Salt 2006).

In parallel, resource management strategies strengthened economic resilience on a more infrastructural level. Farms like Grace's adopted closed-loop practices such as composting from on-site biomass and utilising comfrey-based fertilizers, reducing dependency on commercial inputs. These methods align with agroecological models of sustainability (Altieri, 2018) and supported long-term productivity while lowering financial costs. Grace also collaborated with nearby producers, sourcing oats, honey, and eggs from neighbouring farms to offer regional baskets of mixed organic produce. This kind of local embeddedness, as noted by Folke (2006), reinforced resilience not just through logistics, but through relational exchange and interdependence.



Figure 24: The Green Plot's Self-Service Stand⁶

Flexibility in crop selection further contributed to economic adaptability. Several hosts strategically focused on quick-growing or high-demand produce like leafy greens and herbs, items valued for their freshness during supply chain disruptions. By aligning with consumer concerns about traceability and health, hosts maintained steady revenue streams despite broader market instability (Liu et al., 2018). These decisions were not driven by trend-chasing but by a pragmatic attunement to what the community needed most at a given moment.

Interestingly, these adaptations were not limited to hosts, as volunteers also developed their own forms of economic flexibility. Nina's approach, for instance, is a powerful illustration of an emerging hybrid identity: the 'WOOFer-Vanpreneur'. This model represents a sophisticated blend of values-driven pursuits with the pragmatic financial strategies of the gig

⁶ The image on the left shows the exterior of The Green Plot, highlighting the prominence of its self-service farm stand. The top right image provides a view inside the stand, showcasing a selection of fresh organic produce and the "Your local organic Box Scheme" poster, illustrating direct-to-consumer sales. The bottom right image offers a closer look at the stand's offerings, including bottles of comfrey liquid, indicating the farm's closed-loop resource practices, alongside organic certifications and various seasonal vegetables. Together, these visuals exemplify how diversified sales channels and sustainable resource management contribute to the farm's economic adaptability.

economy, challenging conventional definitions of both "work" and "asset". Nina's case provides a compelling example of how volunteers crafted their own economic resilience. Traveling in her campervan, she used platforms like Camplify and Yescapa to rent it out when she was settled on a farm. This generated a supplementary income stream that offset her living costs and enabled her to continue her volunteer work without being a financial burden on her hosts. Her van, therefore, was a pivotal 'keystone asset', simultaneously a home, a mode of transport, and an income-generating tool that made her entire lifestyle financially viable. Her ability to tap into the burgeoning market for campervan rentals demonstrates a savvy adaptation to the economic climate.

However, this strategy is far from a simple source of passive income because it involves navigating significant complexities and risks. This approach creates a dual asset management burden, where a problem with the business asset (e.g., damage caused by a renter) directly becomes a crisis for her home. Successfully managing rentals while volunteering remotely requires constant connectivity, meticulous communication with renters, and a degree of emotional detachment from the personal space of her home. Furthermore, this lifestyle hinges on navigating the complexities of peer-to-peer rental insurance, where a gap in coverage could be financially catastrophic.

This blend of activities also reshapes the host-volunteer relationship. The WWOOF host becomes an 'unofficial gatekeeper' to the viability of this lifestyle. Their willingness to provide physical space for the van and tolerate the time required for a volunteer to manage their micro-enterprise is crucial. Crucially, Nina's placement at Veridian Farm exemplifies the mixed economy of volunteering, as her connection emerged through overlapping networks of permaculture and ecological living, even though the farm was not a formally listed WWOOF host at the time. This required a high degree of transparency and the ability to adeptly switch between the non-monetary, trust-based economy of informal volunteering and the commercial,

contract-based gig economy of P2P rentals. Nina's story is not just one of individual ingenuity but also reflects a broader shift where the lines between volunteering, travel, and work are becoming increasingly blurred. Her economic resilience was thus relationally distributed, shaped by her ability to leverage both the social capital of these informal networks and the economic opportunities of the wider sharing economy.

Together, these cases demonstrate how farms within these ecological networks responded to economic pressure not through growth or profit-maximisation, but through collective efforts that reinforced social ties, reduced dependency, and redistributed labour and risk. By embedding themselves more deeply in their local communities, and by enabling volunteers to participate in what might be described as forms of 'lifestyle arbitrage', these hosts navigated economic fragility through modes of resilience that were improvisational, cooperative, and ethically grounded. Aligned with broader commitments to social cohesion and ecological care, principles central to permaculture, such practices offer grounded strategies for engaging with systemic uncertainty.

Networked Resilience Across Economic, Social, and Environmental Dimensions

Rather than framing WWOOF as a structurally resilient system, this chapter has traced how resilience was practiced and negotiated through relational dynamics, adaptive strategies, and embedded responses to disruption. While the network offers a platform for exchange, the capacity to endure and adapt, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, was not a property of the WWOOF system itself, but emerged unevenly through a mix of volunteer arrangements, local adaptations, and ecological commitments.

Across multiple host farms, including sites like Veridian Farm and Grace's smallholding, resilience appeared not as a coherent feature of organisational design, but as a pattern of

responses grounded in lived complexity. Hosts coped with the absence of international WWOOFers by leaning more heavily on local volunteers and direct-to-consumer sales. These adjustments often resembled Veteto and Lockyer's (2008) understanding of permaculture as a "cultural system" rather than a fixed model, shaped by experimentation, care, and place-based innovation. It was not WWOOF per se that guaranteed continuity, but the capacity of people, hosts and volunteers alike, to adapt in context, often improvising through shared labour, knowledge exchange, and mutual aid.

Social resilience was similarly enacted rather than ensured. As Cote and Nightingale (2012) remind us, resilience is not neutral, as it always involves questions of who adapts, who benefits, and under what conditions. In this study, volunteers like Tracie, Mia, and Declan found solace and structure in daily ecological tasks, while hosts like Daniel navigated mental health needs, shifting volunteer roles, and financial instability. Emotional resilience emerged in the quiet routines of compost turning, outdoor cooking, dishwashing schedules, and shared conversation: practices that may seem mundane, but which held space for stability in times of wider rupture.

Digital adaptations during the pandemic such as YouTube vlogs, WhatsApp groups, online forums also enabled forms of connectivity that were not originally part of the WWOOF infrastructure, but became essential to maintaining community. As explored earlier, these tools were double-edged: they sustained communication and pedagogy, but also risked flattening the embodied, situated care that characterised life on farms. Yuki's reflections, Julie's emphasis on presence, and Declan's remark about poor phone signal all signalled a preference for being-with, rather than being-connected.

Ecological resilience was perhaps the most locally grounded. It was evident in Grace's composting practices, her collaborative sourcing of oats and honey, and her emphasis on soil regeneration. These practices reflected a commitment to agroecological values, which

emphasise long-term soil fertility, minimal resource use, and collective approaches to sustainability rather than extractive growth models. As noted by Folke (2006) and Barry (2008), such strategies go beyond immediate survival: they reflect values of stewardship, slow transformation, and reciprocal care.

Taken together, these findings challenge the assumption that WWOOF participation alone is sufficient to generate resilience. Instead, resilience across social, economic, and ecological dimensions emerged through networks of trust, embedded routines, and forms of improvisational care. What sustained these farms was not a centralised organisational structure, but a web of contingent relationships. While some of these relationships were facilitated through the WWOOF platform, others developed independently, shaped by local dynamics and mutual reliance.

At the level of the network, resilience can be understood as the capacity of hosts and volunteers to sustain everyday livelihoods, social relations, and ecological practices. This capacity became visible in response to disruptions such as labour loss, economic precarity, and pandemic restrictions, rather than as a stable feature of organisational design. It was unevenly distributed across roles and sites, taking form through context-specific ways of holding things together. Rather than offering a model to be replicated, these host farms demonstrate that resilience within this network is not a uniform property but is always "situated" (Cote and Nightingale, 2012). It is fragile, emerging from the specific histories and constraints of each farm. It is partial, often sustained at the expense of individual well-being, as seen in the emotional labour of hosts. And it is profoundly ethical, frequently grounded in the moral commitments of permaculture, which provided a framework for "staying-with" the trouble when the formal WWOOF exchange faltered. Where WWOOF's platform provided access, permaculture offered a way of organising time, soil, energy, and emotion that allowed life to go on, even

when it frayed. In this light, WWOOF becomes not a guarantor of resilience but a site in which relational, improvisational, and materially grounded resilience could sometimes be cultivated. Resilience, in this account, is not a return to normalcy. It is a contingent form of continuity, and this begins in the garden, not the platform.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

“When you’re farming, you have to keep on top of things, you can’t sort of leave it,” Garry had said during our conversation, his voice steady with the quiet confidence of someone who has lived his work. He spoke about adapting to challenges like pests without resorting to heavy-duty chemicals, using alternatives like neem oil or garlic solutions. “It’s a constant learning curve, modifying as we go, always open to improvement,” he added. His words stayed with me, not just for their practicality but for how they reflected a simple truth I have come to appreciate: that staying attentive and open to change is essential.

Reflecting on Garry’s thoughts, I found myself drawn back to the moment I learned that “tea” could mean dinner, a small adjustment that became part of a larger journey of understanding. Just as a farmer learns and adjusts to their environments, I’ve learned to adapt to the rhythm of this work, each conversation and observation offering a new piece of the puzzle. It feels fitting, then, to close this thesis with the realization that it isn’t a conclusion at all, but a beginning; a reminder that learning, like the land itself, is continuous. Everything around us, and within us, evolves as we do, carrying forward the ‘seeds’ of what we’ve cultivated into future understanding.

Bridging Networks, Practices, and Global Challenges

This chapter synthesises the key findings of this research, weaving together the theoretical insights, empirical observations, and practical implications uncovered throughout the study. By examining WWOOF as a network of ecological practices, it highlights the interwoven themes of belonging, reciprocity, care, and resilience that underpin the network's operations. These interconnected dimensions not only reveal the intricacies of WWOOF's social and ecological engagements but also position it as a vital case study for understanding adaptive systems and sustainable practices in a globalized world. It is important to reemphasise that for many of the farms participating in this study, WWOOF represents just one among several sources of volunteers and support, complementing local, seasonal, and sometimes informal labour networks. This contextual note is crucial because it acknowledges that the resilience and continuity of these farms are not solely dependent on WWOOF, but emerge from a diverse interplay of volunteer networks, including local and informal contributors. This plurality of labour sources situates WWOOF within a broader mixed economy of volunteering and informal exchange, where participation is shaped through ongoing negotiation between material needs, ethical commitments, and relational expectations. This thesis argues that WWOOF operates as a mixed economy of volunteering in which labour, learning, care, and ecological commitment circulate through uneven and negotiated exchanges across diverse sites and conditions.

Through this research, WWOOF emerges as a space where participants cultivate a sense of connection, both to each other and to the land through shared ecological practices. The study also uncovers how reciprocity and power dynamics shape relationships within the network, emphasizing how hosts and volunteers negotiate roles to foster meaningful collaborations. My findings reveal how these negotiations, often shaped by subtle and overt power asymmetries,

create a complex web of relational learning, where the boundaries between host, volunteer, learner, and teacher blur and shift over time. Further, it examines the centrality of care practices and ecological citizenship in sustaining the network's ethos, highlighting how sustainability is enacted through everyday routines and shared values. Finally, it reflects on the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these farms during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, offering lessons on sustaining community and practice in times of uncertainty.

This thesis contributes to understanding how WWOOF functions not as a fixed model of ecological volunteerism, but as a dynamic, relational network where care, reciprocity, and learning are co-constructed through lived practice. By combining anthropological perspectives with empirical insights, it highlights how ecological engagement is shaped by situated learning, relational care, and adaptive strategies in the face of global challenges.

Moreover, this thesis draws upon an inductive approach, where questions emerging from fieldwork such as how care and reciprocity are unevenly negotiated, led to richer insights. These emergent questions allowed me to move beyond initial assumptions and uncover the layered dynamics of learning, care, and adaptation in ecological networks. By attending to lived experience, the research highlights both how WWOOF operates and the broader complexities of volunteer-driven sustainability efforts.

Anthropological concepts such as Ingold's "dwelling" and Lave and Wenger's "communities of practice" have been invaluable in illuminating the learning processes embedded in WWOOF exchanges. By observing how volunteers learn skilled farming practices such as composting, crop rotation, permaculture design not through formal instruction but through doing, watching, and conversing, I came to appreciate the subtle pedagogies at play. This learning is more than technical; it is philosophical. It is about learning to learn, not just acquiring skills, but developing an attentiveness to oneself, others, and the ecological surroundings. It involves

learning to adapt to change, to embrace difference, and to navigate the unpredictable currents of shared practice and community. This philosophy of learning reflects a deeper ecological wisdom, where adaptability and relational understanding are integral to sustainability. These insights underscore how WWOOF, as a site of ‘learning by doing,’ operates beyond traditional educational models, integrating ecological, social, and cultural dimensions into everyday practice.

Across different farms, WWOOFers accumulated diverse experiences, adapting to varied contexts, tasks, and host expectations. This accumulation of practice-based knowledge honed technical skills and deepened their understanding of ecological care, resilience, and the relational dynamics at the heart of sustainability. Indeed, while WWOOF offers a platform for volunteer exchange, it is the underlying ethos and principles of the farms, particularly those grounded in permaculture that enable resilience and adaptive strategies. When we look more closely, it becomes clear that resilience emerges from a broader ecological philosophy embodied by these farms, of which WWOOF participation is just one component.

By revisiting the research questions, this chapter situates WWOOF within broader dialogues about sustainability, resilience, and ecological stewardship in an era of global challenges. It examines how WWOOF’s global-local framework fosters ecological knowledge and sustainable living, and how its adaptive strategies provide insights for navigating uncertainty. In connecting these practices to larger challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and food security, the chapter highlights WWOOF’s broader relevance as a model of interconnected systems. These findings demonstrate that sustainability and resilience are not inherent properties of systems, but emergent outcomes of relational negotiation, care, and adaptation.

By explicitly connecting WWOOF's dynamics to broader discussions of alternative economies and social-ecological resilience, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates in sustainability science and anthropology, highlighting how everyday practices, rather than abstract models, can generate transformative insights for both local and global sustainability efforts. Moreover, digital platforms have played a crucial role in extending volunteers' agency, providing spaces to share insights, critique practices, and build wider communities of ecological care. These digital interactions complement the embodied learning on farms, illustrating the multi-layered nature of ecological engagement.

Finally, this conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the study, underscoring the enduring relevance of WWOOF's practices in supporting and sustaining sustainable, networked solutions to global challenges. By illustrating how localized, practice-based engagements can generate global insights, this research also highlights the transformative potential of social networks in addressing pressing environmental and social issues. While this chapter marks the formal close of the dissertation, it also invites further reflection and exploration, emphasizing that the work of fostering sustainability and interconnectedness remains an ongoing, collective endeavor. This journey does not end with theoretical exploration but continues through the lived experiences of individuals and communities committed to reimagining ecological and social futures.

As I reflect on this journey, I am reminded that this research is not a solitary endeavor, but a dialogic and evolving process shaped by encounters, observations, and shared moments. The seeds of understanding cultivated through this work will continue to grow and adapt, carried forward by communities, researchers, and practitioners committed to a more sustainable and interconnected future.

Summary of Key Findings

As I interpret it, the findings suggest that WWOOF's significance does not lie in any single blueprint for sustainable agriculture or cultural exchange, but in the convergence of diverse local practices and personal engagements. Belonging and relatedness remain central: participants often forge connections that go beyond transactional labour arrangements. Shared meals, cooperative fieldwork, and collective aims in managing the land create moments where volunteers and hosts may feel more like family than strangers. These relationships, sometimes humorously expressed as volunteers calling their hosts "parents" or "Dad," underscore that the network's cohesion emerges as much from social closeness as from formal structures. Such ties are neither confined to the farm nor guaranteed in every encounter, but when they do form, they can enhance the overall sense of purpose and continuity that anchors WWOOF's activities.

Digital interactions introduce a dimension of continuity and open-ended exchange that neither farms nor seasonal encounters alone can provide. Across YouTube channels, WhatsApp discussions, and online forums, the stories and solutions that would otherwise disperse with the departure of volunteers instead linger, circulating and evolving over time. The analysis of web-based material ensures that insights and concerns do not fade once a traveler moves on, as these platforms preserve threads of conversation that re-engage newcomers and returning participants alike. What emerges is not a tidy archive of best practices, but something more flexible and improvisational: a space where scattered pieces of experience, advice, and reflection overlap, sometimes clashing, sometimes complementing one another. Although misunderstandings remain possible and no digital tool guarantees consensus, the persistence of these dialogues makes it harder for participants to feel isolated or without recourse. Even if a volunteer leaves a farm uncertain about how to handle a particular challenge, they know there are people elsewhere, including fellow volunteers, former hosts, and a distributed and mobile 'community of practice' that over the decades has acquired a distinctive kind of resilience, who

may offer a relevant perspective. As we have explored, however, this resilience is not inherent or guaranteed. Digital interactions can be uneven, fragmented, and shaped by the same asymmetries and miscommunications that exist in face-to-face settings. The ability to access advice or feel connected depends on individual agency, technological literacy, and the willingness of others to engage. Moreover, not all participants are equally visible or vocal in these platforms, leading to the risk that certain perspectives dominate while others fade into silence. The strength of this network, therefore, lies not in its perfection or universality but in its potential to create moments of connection and support, however provisional or imperfect. Through this ongoing, if imperfect, conversation, roles become less fixed, and expertise is not the sole domain of any single party. Instead, scattered knowledge can coalesce into something more cumulative and layered, hinting that the identity of the network itself takes shape as much in these electronic exchanges as in physical interactions.

Reflecting on how volunteers' aspirations evolve over time reveals a layered relationship between initial expectations, lived experiences, and the ongoing reassessment that follows. Participation in WWOOF rarely unfolds according to a singular narrative. Instead, it can be viewed as a process moving through three overlapping phases: prior to arrival, newcomers are often guided by digital portrayals that inspire hopes of meaningful cultural immersion, ecological learning, and farming simplicity; an anticipation molded as much by online storytelling as by personal aspiration. Once on-site, however, these aspirations encounter the tangible complexity of farm life, where the romance of rural idyll may give way to physically taxing tasks, linguistic barriers, and the delicate social negotiations required to find one's place. In this setting, volunteers often discover that farm routines do not always grant them equal footing with hosts, and that their labour, while essential, may not consistently yield the educational experiences or cultural exchanges they had pictured. After leaving, participants reflect on what they have gained and lost, reevaluating their early optimism in light of practical

encounters and ongoing dialogues with others who have followed similar paths. Rather than discarding their initial ideals, they tend to adjust and refine them, emerging with a more realistic understanding of what it takes to bridge personal interests, environmental ethics, and the messy realities of collaborative agriculture.

This evolution of volunteer perspectives mirrors broader tensions within alternative food systems, as highlighted by Kloppenburg et al. (2000) and Jones, Pimbert and Jiggins (2011). Participants in WWOOF, like those in community-supported agriculture (CSA) and other grassroots initiatives, often begin with aspirations toward localism, sustainability, and fairness. Yet these ideals frequently encounter systemic barriers, entrenched market dynamics, resource constraints, and complex social negotiations that challenge their realisation. As these scholars emphasise, participants navigate between cooperative ideals and practical compromises, creating a dynamic space where sustainability and care are not static goals but evolving practices shaped by material realities and relational tensions. In this way, the thesis situates WWOOF as part of a broader constellation of collaborative agricultural models that resist simplistic narratives of either utopian success or structural failure. It acknowledges the complex, sometimes contradictory convergence of diverse aspirations, actions, and systemic constraints that shape both individual experiences and collective outcomes. By integrating the insights of Kloppenburg et al. (2000) and Jones, Pimbert and Jiggins (2011), this analysis highlights how WWOOF's evolving practices reflect both the aspirations of its participants and the realities of ecological, economic, and social entanglement in a globalized world.

Within these layered experiences, the dynamics of reciprocity stand out as particularly revealing. Borrowing from Sahlins' typology, we can see how WWOOF's volunteer-host relationships oscillate between balanced, unbalanced, and more context-dependent forms of exchange. Mutual benefit, where a fair trade of labour for knowledge, cultural insight, and sustenance occurs might be the stated goal, but imbalances appear when hosts lean too heavily

on volunteer labour without providing commensurate learning opportunities, or when volunteers arrive with expectations that exceed what hosts can reasonably offer. These tensions often result in complex reciprocity, where motives and outcomes blur; a volunteer might accept less-than-ideal conditions in pursuit of certain intangible rewards, or a host might offer extra kindness to compensate for structural constraints like economic pressures. Indeed, the backdrop of small-scale farms grappling with financial viability and external uncertainties further complicates these dynamics. Hosts typically hold more decision-making power, setting schedules and determining roles, while volunteers remain dependent on their guidance and resources, which can reinforce subtle hierarchies. Economic strains, such as fluctuating market conditions or increased production costs, can intensify these asymmetries, prompting hosts and volunteers alike to renegotiate both the terms of labour and the underlying values that define their collaboration. Reciprocity in such contexts functions as a dynamic, contested practice, not a static or purely idealized exchange (Sallnow, 1989). His dialectical perspective highlights how social interactions, even when framed by cultural norms, can both reproduce and challenge power relations, revealing the inherent contradictions within seemingly cooperative arrangements. In WWOOF, these contradictions do not represent failures of the system; instead, they exemplify its complex, adaptive nature, where collaboration, power, and sustainability are continually reconfigured through lived experience and negotiation.

In the same vein, care emerges as a multifaceted theme in WWOOF, intimately tied to both food production and environmental stewardship. Many volunteers arrive with a practical curiosity about how their food is grown, but as they turn compost, enrich soils, and encourage biodiversity, some begin to develop a deeper ecological ethic. Rather than simply acquiring techniques, they learn that caring for the land requires active, ongoing engagement: an ethic shaped by the entangled relationships between humans and their surroundings. As explored in Chapter 7, this aligns with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) conceptualisation of care as a situated,

materially engaged practice: one that intertwines ecological, social, and ethical dimensions, and cannot be reduced to an abstract ideal. Importantly, volunteers do not passively absorb these lessons but actively shape their own experiences of care, negotiating roles, responsibilities, and practices based on personal values, cultural backgrounds, and relational dynamics. While this progression in WWOOF is not uniform and cannot be guaranteed, those who engage wholeheartedly often leave with more than practical skills. They depart with a heightened awareness of ecological principles that can influence their choices long after returning home, whether in their food systems, environmental practices, or community involvement.

Hosts similarly play a central role in cultivating an ethic of care. Everyday routines such as showing volunteers how to rotate crops, discussing water conservation at mealtime, or guiding them through hands-on projects, do more than impart technical know-how. They convey values of stewardship, patience, and a considered approach to working with living systems. This once again reflects Puig de la Bellacasa's insight that care is enacted through mundane, everyday practices, where values are transmitted via gestures, routines, and embodied knowledge, complementing verbal communication. Volunteers actively contribute to this care because they bring their own insights, experiences, and adaptations, enriching the learning environment and fostering a two-way exchange of ecological and social knowledge. Such care is never abstract, as it is shaped by each farm's unique context and the evolving interactions that arise there. Volunteers may internalize lessons that extend well beyond the physical boundaries of the farm. A single insight about how soil health connects to larger ecological networks can reshape a participant's broader worldview. Meanwhile, hosts find themselves balancing these ideals with the operational demands of running a farm, negotiating the line between aspirational principles and practical necessities. Across several sites, these practices were often informed by permaculture principles, where attention to soil health, water cycles, and interdependence

between species shaped how care was understood and enacted in everyday work. Permaculture operated as a practical ethic guiding decisions about planting, composting, and resource use within the constraints of each farm, without being formalised as a fixed doctrine. In this respect, permaculture resonates with what Fox (2013) describes as commons-oriented practice, where ethical commitments are worked out through context-sensitive action and situated decision-making.

Beyond the immediate space of the farm, digital advocacy efforts like blogs, vlogs, and other social media activities amplify these experiences, circulating lessons learned, cautionary tales, and success stories well beyond any single farm or host. This does not automatically translate into global policy shifts or flawless community-building, yet it offers a means for participants to contribute to broader environmental conversations and to remain engaged even when circumstances disrupt in-person interactions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, these digital strategies provided a buffer, keeping lines of communication open and enabling some level of continuity when direct exchanges were limited. Here too, care extends beyond the physical space of the farm, manifesting as a networked practice that resonates with broader debates on digital resilience and sustainability. Volunteers contribute to this distributed care network, sharing their reflections, strategies, and questions, and in doing so, exercise their own agency in shaping collective ecological and social futures.

These dynamics bring into focus how resilience operated across the sites examined in this study. Resilience did not rest in the durability of any single farm or organisational structure, but emerged through the uneven capacities of hosts, volunteers, and wider support networks to adapt practices, sustain relationships, and maintain care during moments of disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a critical stress point, exposing vulnerabilities while also revealing adaptive strategies through which labour, knowledge, and emotional support were reconfigured across embodied and digital spaces. Moments of stress, such as the COVID-19

pandemic illustrated in this study, offer a particularly clear context for examining these adaptive processes.

These adaptive responses form part of the wider context in which WWOOF's practices are situated. Networks grounded in shared values and local adaptation persisted through both environmental and social uncertainties without presenting a polished solution. While not devoid of economic and practical strains, and certainly not positioned as a universal remedy, WWOOF demonstrates how ethical commitments and flexible arrangements can help sustain farm operations through challenging periods. Educationally, WWOOF's hands-on approach serves as a catalyst for deeper engagement with ecological issues. Immersing oneself in tasks like permaculture design or resource management transforms theoretical concepts into tangible knowledge, something lived rather than just studied. This kind of learning may inspire participants to advocate for similar principles in their own circles, contributing indirectly to broader sustainability efforts. Although not all volunteers become staunch environmental advocates, many return home carrying a nuanced understanding of agricultural practices, ecological care, and cross-cultural exchange that can inform their future decisions.

From a broader perspective, WWOOF's multiple layers of personal, communal, environmental, and digital aspects intersect to produce a network that can influence thinking and practice beyond its immediate membership. As highlighted by Hargreaves et al. (2013), such networks are vital in sustainability initiatives, offering advice, support, and adaptive capacity that extend beyond individual farms to wider systems of ecological and social resilience. By encouraging direct participation, iterative learning, and dialogue, WWOOF fosters conditions where local actions resonate with broader sustainability goals. This demonstrates how care and reciprocity are evolving, negotiated practices, rather than static ideals. At the same time, its inherent pluralism and occasional frictions remind us that no single path defines sustainability. Instead, it emerges from ongoing conversations, improvisations,

and recalibrations. In this sense, the findings bring to light the value of embracing complexity, acknowledging systemic entanglements, and recognizing that sustainable futures are co-created through the continual interplay of human and more-than-human relations.

Theoretical Contributions

Reflecting on this research, WWOOF's significance, I argue, lies not in offering a singular, definitive model of sustainable agriculture or cultural exchange, but in demonstrating how a network's diversity can invite ongoing negotiation and critical thought. A bottom-up ethnographic inquiry reveals WWOOF not as a cohesive social movement, but as a relational field of diverse, applied, and often contested practices. This approach, grounded in social anthropology, makes it possible to focus on how participants navigate ethical commitments within the material realities of agricultural labour, showing that sustainability emerges from direct, lived experience.

When we look back at the spectrum of ecological volunteering sites in Figure 5 in Chapter 2, this relational field becomes visually intelligible as a synthetic condensation of the research findings. The mapping of sites along the axes of institutional structure and relationality provides a framework for understanding how diversity across the network is shaped by the tensions between formal requirements and personal connections. For instance, Sophie's journey at Veridian Farm illustrates a position of high relationality where pedagogical care aligns her personal growth with the long-term needs of the land, showing how sustained involvement shifts a participant from the periphery to the core of a community. In contrast, Elias at The Bridge Institute represents an extreme of high structure and low relationality, where de facto supervision and a focus on task efficiency highlight the unevenness of the mixed economy of volunteering. Veridian Farm further demonstrates the fragility of care through its strategic shift away from formal hosting as a response to the overwhelming emotional labour

required to sustain such deep relational bonds. By locating these figures and sites on the axes, it becomes clear that while the social atmospheres vary, a fundamental commonality persists in the material commitment to sustaining the ecosystem. The "matters of care" that Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) describes are thus negotiated differently at each point on the graph while remaining anchored in the physical requirements of the soil and the seasons. What the figure ultimately foregrounds is not a hierarchy of better or worse sites, but the varied conditions through which care is practiced, sustained, or strained.

The persistence of these material requirements depends upon a social landscape where diversity manifests as a dynamic relationship between episodic relatedness and community kinship. Episodic relatedness, as we explored, describes the temporary, but often deeply meaningful, social connections that form at the level of the individual farm. Rooted in the practical realities of high volunteer turnover and short stays, these relationships can fade quietly after a volunteer leaves. Community kinship, in contrast, is a broader concept that operates at the network level. It refers to the sense of belonging and "fictive kinship" that emerges through shared practices like communal meals, storytelling, and humour. The perceived contradiction between these concepts is not a flaw in the system, but a fundamental dynamic of how it works. I argue that these two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but rather two sides of the same coin. The "community" of WWOOF is not a stable, fixed entity like a traditional village with enduring kinship ties; rather, it is a meta-community built from the accumulation of countless moments of episodic relatedness. The strength of WWOOF's community lies precisely in its ability to generate these temporary but impactful relationships. It is a "fragile and contingent form of continuity" that persists not through deep, lifelong bonds with every individual, but through the continuous flow of people who participate in shared practices and contribute to a collective, evolving ethos, much like cooperation in a Tamang community that persists out of necessity,

or the "potential affine" in Amazonian anthropology, which describes relationships that open the door to future cooperation without needing to be permanent.

This multiplicity challenges the idea that sustainability must conform to a single template. Instead, it brings into view how people in different places, facing distinct environmental and social contexts, perceive and express varied understandings of reciprocity, ethical labour arrangements, and ecological care through conversation. Such pluralism is not a weakness; it is a strength. It provides a generative space where differing approaches can be tested, refined, or reimaged in response to changing circumstances, rather than leading to a single blueprint. Within this diverse network of perspectives, WWOOF's relationship to food sovereignty reveals a similarly layered dynamic. Some farms reinforce local autonomy, strengthen direct producer-consumer relationships, and invigorate community-based food systems. Others, however, may rely on external inputs such as globally mobile volunteers or niche organic markets that reflect broader transnational patterns. Rather than reducing this complexity to a dichotomy of empowerment versus dependence, WWOOF therefore encourages a more nuanced engagement with food sovereignty. Its practices resonate with food sovereignty ideals, emphasizing localized control over food production, ecological care, and equitable exchange, while simultaneously navigating the challenges of global interconnectedness. Participants encounter, interpret, and embody aspects of food sovereignty through everyday decisions and adaptations, engaging with questions about autonomy, sustainability, and cultural continuity. For instance, while international volunteers may introduce new farming techniques or cultural practices, their transient nature might also challenge the continuity of local systems. Similarly, the reliance on global organic certification standards, while facilitating market access, may inadvertently overshadow locally embedded traditions of sustainable farming. The network thus becomes a forum for reflecting on how community-level agriculture projects interact with,

challenge, or adapt to globalized trends, fostering ongoing dialogue about the balance between autonomy and interconnectedness.

Such complexities often emerge most clearly in moments of tension or misalignment. WWOOF's flexible, trust-based exchanges can at times produce misunderstandings or unmet expectations. For example, volunteers unfamiliar with agricultural labour may struggle to meet the demands of peak harvest seasons, while hosts accustomed to a certain rhythm of farm life may find it challenging to accommodate volunteers with differing levels of commitment or skill. But rather than treating these frictions as setbacks, we might view them as catalysts for learning and growth. Questions arise: How can hosts better communicate their values to first time volunteers unfamiliar with local customs? How might volunteers reconcile their personal sustainability ideals with the practical compromises they encounter on the ground? These struggles and negotiations stimulate deeper inquiry into the moral and cultural dimensions of environmental stewardship. Through these challenges, participants are often pushed to reflect on their assumptions about labour, reciprocity, and ecological care. Far from undermining the network's contributions, these challenging interactions highlight the educational potential of friction.

These experiences remind us that sustainability, in practice, is a responsive and adaptive practice evolving through collective problem-solving and mutual reflection. In resisting a polished narrative of smooth global cooperation or perfectly aligned values, WWOOF provides a more honest portrayal of what it means to build ethical and ecological commitments across distances. Rather than a polished success story, it offers a mosaic of experiments, partial resolutions, and ongoing dialogues. This does not diminish its theoretical importance. On the contrary, WWOOF's nuanced, evolving character urges us to consider how broad, networked engagement with sustainability can be both aspirational and grounded in daily realities. Theoretical understandings of ecological citizenship and relational care benefit from

recognizing that participants forge connections across cultural, geographical, and philosophical divides, continually adapting their strategies and learning from shortcomings as much as from successes.

Given these points, WWOOF's theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that international, volunteer-driven networks can foster a relational, ethically attuned approach to environmental action without relying on a strict blueprint. Its participants navigate overlapping spheres of global and local influence, negotiate the terms of food sovereignty, and learn through both harmony and disagreement. This learning extends beyond theoretical ideals, encompassing the practical, cultural, and sensory dimensions of sustainability. Volunteers and hosts exchange more than abstract ideas. They share recipes, cooking methods, as well as explore adapting to new tools. Apart from that, they also experiment with local food traditions to use surplus crops, such as turning turnips into simple new dishes or preparing multi-herb pestos. These practices reflect a dynamic, hands-on learning process, where participants negotiate their understanding of sustainability in the field, the kitchen, and around the dining table. These dynamics emphasise that WWOOF enables diverse approaches to emerge through dialogue, experimentation, and mutual adaptation, rather than prescribing a single model for sustainability. This narrative approach is deliberate and aligned with the ethnographic tradition of writing, which aims to capture the "lived, negotiated, and contextually-rich practice" of sustainability rather than a list of technical phases. For example, hosts may experiment with permaculture or agroecological specific techniques introduced by volunteers, while volunteers often take home lessons that reshape their personal lifestyles or advocacy efforts.

Taken together, these insights challenge us to appreciate sustainability as an iterative process, rather than a fixed endpoint. It thrives on diversity and learns through tension. Genuine change emerges from the coming together of diverse voices, evolving practices, and a shared willingness to continually reassess what it means to live and farm responsibly. In this sense,

WWOOF offers a compelling reminder that sustainability must remain flexible and inclusive, accommodating both local particularities and global interconnectedness.

Challenges and Future Directions

WWOOF's diverse network, which operates globally as a federation of largely autonomous national organisations each with its own administrative structure and approach, inherently raises questions about how to maintain a sense of common purpose across very different farm settings and participant expectations. The decentralised nature of WWOOF's administrative running allows for local adaptability; yet, this means that the implementation of overarching standards, the depth of host vetting, and the direct support available to volunteers and hosts can vary significantly from one national organisation to another. For instance, WWOOF UK operates as a registered charity with a Board of Trustees responsible for governance and holding Annual General Meetings (AGMs), as is typical for such legal entities; however, direct WWOOFer (volunteer) participation in this formal governance is generally limited. Similarly, some national organisations like WWOOF France utilise 'regional referents,' and WWOOF UK has in the past mentioned 'Regional Host Coordinators.' However, a standardized, universally implemented system for direct regional volunteer and host liaison is generally absent across the entire WWOOF network of national groups, with support often centralised at the national level.

Beyond these structural considerations, practical challenges in maintaining a common purpose also emerge from the varied motivations of participants. Volunteers may arrive seeking cultural enrichment, technical know-how, or a deeper understanding of sustainable farming. Hosts, conversely, often need reliable labour or have particular ecological approaches they wish to highlight. This discrepancy in motives, potentially amplified by differing levels of national organisational oversight or direct support, can lead to misunderstandings or unmet hopes,

especially when participants step onto a farm with visions shaped by media portrayals or previous stories shared online. Balancing these varied interests calls for consistent communication, clear explanations of what each party can realistically offer and gain, and a willingness to adjust as circumstances change, extending beyond occasional conversations.

Ensuring that volunteers receive the learning experiences they seek and that hosts gain the support they need might involve more explicit guidelines or pre-arrival discussions that clarify roles, daily routines, and the nature of the work. Stronger national administrative frameworks could play a role here. For example, they might facilitate more robust host vetting processes (as seen in WWOOF USA or WWOOF Canada's proactive measures). They could also provide clearer channels for dispute resolution when expectations are not met, potentially mitigating some challenges from the network's inherent diversity. Additionally, guaranteeing that all farms adhere to core ecological principles can be challenging, given that some sites focus on particular agro-ecological methods while others lean toward commercial viability. The federated structure of WWOOF, with FoWO (Federation of WWOOF Organisations) aiming to unite and support national groups, offers a potential avenue for encouraging best practices. However, enforcing a baseline commitment to certain environmental standards without stifling each farm's individuality remains an ongoing balancing act for both national bodies and the international federation.

Addressing these complexities could be aided by more focused research efforts. For instance, comparative studies within the UK could shed light on how regional differences such as climate patterns, farm sizes, or market conditions, and perhaps even the past effectiveness or current absence of structures like Regional Host Coordinators, shape the kinds of learning and labour exchanges that occur. A farm in a northern area, coping with shorter growing seasons or more limited local markets, may manage volunteer expectations and ecological priorities differently

than one in the south. Understanding how these localized factors influence what volunteers learn and how hosts run their operations could reveal patterns that help the network and its national administrative bodies refine its approach. Insights gleaned from these comparisons might guide those responsible for WWOOF coordination (be it national staff or any local liaisons) in offering more tailored advice or resources to participants, and help volunteers choose farms that align better with their interests and the type of learning environment they prefer.

Looking beyond immediate encounters, future research might also explore the longer-term impacts of participating in WWOOF. Volunteers who spend time cultivating soil, practicing composting, or integrating permaculture principles may carry those lessons into their future careers or personal lives. Do volunteers who gain hands-on experience in sustainable agriculture go on to advocate for environmental practices in their home communities, support local food initiatives, or influence their professional choices? Similarly, hosts who welcome a steady flow of volunteers might develop stronger community ties or integrate new techniques learned indirectly from volunteer input. Tracing these downstream effects over the years could show whether WWOOF's informal education model truly leaves a lasting imprint and how it influences broader ecological awareness and community resilience.

Another area for exploration involves the evolving role of digital tools. The pandemic demonstrated how online platforms could keep participants connected when travel was restricted. More deliberate use of these technologies might enhance the WWOOF experience even in ordinary times. For example, virtual orientations before arrival could help manage expectations. Digital repositories of best practices or forums devoted to troubleshooting common issues could also support both new and experienced participants. Research into how blending online resources with in-person learning might expand access and accommodate

participants with different needs or limited travel possibilities could shape WWOOF's strategy going forward. Such efforts might provide continuity and also open the network to individuals who otherwise might hesitate to engage.

WWOOF can chart a more informed path forward by recognizing these challenges. These challenges range from reconciling varied priorities to fostering consistent ecological standards across farms, and they are intertwined with its federated administrative structure and the varying capacities of its national organisations. A more informed path also comes from pursuing research that clarifies regional differences, measures long-term impacts, and refines the use of digital tools. Future directions lie in carefully balancing the network's flexibility with clearer communication, resource-sharing, more consistently implemented support structures at the national level, and ongoing learning. In doing so, it may become even more effective at connecting local agricultural efforts with the wider world, nurturing participants' growth, and inspiring thoughtful environmental engagement across contexts.

Practical Recommendations for WWOOF and Similar Networks

To better align the diverse expectations of hosts and volunteers within WWOOF and similar farm-based work-exchange networks, recognising that the nature of these engagements can vary from officially affiliated WWOOF stays to more localised volunteering arrangements, a first step might be to explicitly communicate roles and possibilities before anyone sets foot on the farm. While WWOOF farm descriptions on official directories, as detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, often provide a good starting point by outlining a farm's structure (e.g., smallholder, cooperative), guiding philosophies (such as biodynamics or permaculture), or specific focus (like being an 'intentional community' or 'educational garden'), a more direct and detailed pre-arrival communication can further solidify understanding. This could take the form of written agreements or short pre-arrival online calls, offering prospective volunteers clear descriptions

of daily work rhythms (including expected hours and types of tasks), anticipated skill-development opportunities, and any particular ecological principles the farm actively follows, regardless of its formal WWOOF affiliation at any given time. Such measures reduce guesswork, encouraging participants to arrive with a more realistic understanding of what their time will entail and the specific form of reciprocity in place. Rather than encountering misunderstandings halfway through the exchange, both hosts and volunteers would begin on more even footing, with a shared frame of reference established from the outset.

Building on this foundation, a more structured approach to learning could enhance the exchange's educational dimension. It is acknowledged that many WWOOF hosts, and indeed sites central to this research such as Veridian Farm, with its established permaculture courses, diploma tutoring led by Daniel, and its vision to "support networking across the region in all things permaculture," and Valley Organic, with its explicit aim to "Provide opportunities for the local community to come together and learn about growing food, agriculture and sustainable living" through traineeships and school visits, already function as significant training-oriented communities, similar in spirit to established centres like Redfield Community or Lower Shaw Farm⁷. While preserving the informal, hands-on character of WWOOFing more broadly, other hosts might integrate optional modules such as brief workshops, practical demonstrations, or guided discussions to highlight key farming techniques or resource management strategies. Such structured moments need not be rigid or lengthy; even a short, well-planned session focusing on a single topic like composting or water-saving methods could enrich participants' understanding. By setting aside time for explicit teaching, volunteers gain

⁷ Redfield Community, established in 1978 in Buckinghamshire, is an intentional community focused on communal living, income-sharing, and environmental responsibility, managing its own small-scale organic farm on 17 acres of land. Lower Shaw Farm, near Swindon, is a former dairy farm now run as a residential education centre that hosts a wide variety of courses, events, and "working weekends" on topics including sustainable living, crafts, and self-sufficiency, and is also a long-standing WWOOF host.

more than incremental know-how: they walk away with clearer, more transferable lessons, deepening the long-term impact of their stay.

Embracing digital tools more proactively could further strengthen these efforts. The WWOOFer vlogs analysed in Chapter 5 demonstrate a vibrant existing digital ecology of peer-to-peer advice and experience sharing. While some national WWOOF organisations or individual hosts may already offer online resources, a more systematic and curated approach by the wider WWOOF network could provide significant benefits. Online platforms might serve as curated knowledge repositories where hosts and volunteers contribute insights gleaned from their respective contexts, moving beyond merely keeping people connected in exceptional circumstances. A more deliberate approach to digital platforms matters, since these tools influence how knowledge circulates, how expectations are formed, and how support is accessed. By carefully curating digital spaces, WWOOF and similar socio-ecological networks can support diverse practical approaches to ecological living and mutual learning across contexts. Participants could consult organized resources, rather than sifting through scattered advice found across disparate blogs or forums or relying solely on word-of-mouth. These might include, for example, a collection of short video tutorials demonstrating field techniques (expanding on what individual vloggers already do), a moderated forum focused on troubleshooting common issues (offering more structured support than unmoderated comment sections), or a periodically updated directory of region-specific planting guides. These virtual reference points could complement direct experience, making it easier for volunteers to build on prior learning and for hosts to share proven practices without having to repeat the same instructions each time.

Refinements along these lines hold relevance not only for WWOOF but for a growing landscape of similar initiatives striving to integrate environmental considerations, cultural exchange, and community involvement. By offering clarity at the start (thereby mitigating

ambiguities often present in these mixed economies of exchange), embedding moments of structured learning into the routine, and tapping into the sustained connectivity and resource-sharing potential of digital tools, such networks might create more coherent, caring, and meaningful experiences for everyone involved. This approach suggests a model in which the richness of local variation and personal encounters is not lost, but guided gently by frameworks that help participants navigate complexity with greater confidence and build personal and collective resilience. In doing so, WWOOF and like-minded projects may continue to evolve, retaining their flexible, open spirit while providing more reliable scaffolding for ecological literacy, mutual respect, the cultivation of ethical care practices, and the kinds of learning outcomes that endure well beyond the fields, potentially fostering more engaged ecological citizens and stronger, more adaptable local communities.

Final Reflections: Toward a Sustainable Future

As I consider the journey traced in this thesis, I am reminded that it began not with a theory, but with a chance encounter nearly a decade ago with a WWOOFer in the Welsh countryside. That initial curiosity sparked an intellectual journey that this thesis represents. What began as a question about a volunteer program evolved into a deeper inquiry that could only be answered by moving from the certainties of environmental science into the relational world of social anthropology. It was through an anthropological lens, with its focus on ‘dwelling’ and ‘communities of practice,’ that I came to see sustainability not as a fixed system to be implemented, but as a lived, negotiated, and context-rich practice. This interdisciplinary approach, nurtured by the guidance of supervisors with deep knowledge of anthropology and a personal history with WWOOF, proved essential, as it enabled me to focus on how participants navigate ethical commitments through the messy, hands-on work of farm life.

This intellectual journey from theory to practice presented its own steep learning curve. As an ethnographer using participant observation, I was not merely an observer but a fully immersed volunteer, and the transition was immediate and visceral. The physical reality of farm work was a world away from academic texts; it was the constant, nagging ache in muscles unaccustomed to manual labour and the practical difficulty of documenting a fleeting moment while my hands were caked in mud. I found myself in a state of dual consciousness, my body engaged in the rhythm of weeding or harvesting while my mind raced to capture the nuances of a conversation or the significance of a shared glance. This was the first lesson in humility: understanding that ethnographic insight doesn't come from a detached position of authority, but from the ground up, earned through shared physical effort.

Compounding this was the silent, ever-present challenge of navigating this world as a non-native English speaker. It was one thing to discuss ecological concepts in a seminar, but quite another to learn a new, highly specific vocabulary in the field, under the pressure of daily work. The names of tools for instance a dibber, a hoe, a mattock, were not just words to be memorised; they were tied to specific actions, cultural histories, and ways of being in a British garden. I spent evenings poring over gardening websites, trying to match the names to the objects I had used all day. Remembering the English names for plants, from distinguishing between kale and chard, between different varieties of squash was a constant, background hum of mental effort. This linguistic labour proved to be a formidable and often invisible undertaking, one that underscored the profound difference between theoretical knowledge and embodied, cultural understanding.

It was on this tightrope, balancing the physical demands of a volunteer, the intellectual focus of a researcher, and the linguistic adaptation of a cultural outsider that the central argument of this thesis took shape. The constant "political" challenge of managing my dual roles was not

just about being a helper and an inquirer. It was an ongoing, internal negotiation: I had to fulfill my reciprocal duty to work hard as a WWOOFer to earn my keep, while simultaneously finding the time, energy, and social space to ask the questions and make the observations needed to gain 'valuable' insights as a researcher. I learned firsthand that trust is built not just through words, but through the willingness to learn, to make mistakes, and to show up day after day. This embodied struggle is why I came to see sustainability not as a fixed ideal to be achieved, but as a messy, relational, and ongoing process of effortful, and often uncertain, learning. This thesis, therefore, is as much a product of that personal, methodological journey as it is an analysis of the WWOOF network itself.

This research, by ethnographically examining the WWOOF network, contributes to social anthropology by illuminating the lived complexities of alternative food networks and volunteer tourism. Volunteer trajectories in WWOOF are rarely uniform; they unfold through fluctuating host relationships, task allocation, and moments of recognition or frustration. A single farm can embody both the ideals of reciprocal learning and the realities of disempowerment. This mixed economy of volunteering highlights the negotiated nature of participation, where the episodic relatedness of volunteers shapes both expectations and outcomes. The underlying strength of WWOOF's approach lies in how it brings together individual aspirations and communal priorities, demonstrating a capacity to navigate discrepancies that is particularly vital within its inherently multicultural and cosmopolitan networking paradigm.

Significantly, WWOOF's practices extend beyond the physical spaces where fields are weeded and seeds are sown. Digital communication channels, informal feedback loops, and ongoing dialogues all extend the impact of these encounters. As these conversations and shared experiences accumulate, they form a kind of living library, enabling participants to draw on collective wisdom rather than relying solely on isolated, trial-and-error methods.

This perspective suggests that the path toward sustainable futures is neither about scaling a single, ideal model nor about achieving seamless consensus. Instead, it involves acknowledging that methods, values, and expectations will always differ. WWOOF's narrative invites us to see this diversity as generative; an opportunity to refine practices, share stories, and deepen a collective sense of purpose, moving beyond viewing it as a drawback.

From these reflections, it is clear that fostering environmental responsibility entails more than implementing protocols or distributing knowledge. It involves encouraging relationships that can withstand uncertainty and difference, where trust, dialogue, and a commitment to ongoing care become essential tools. WWOOF offers a working illustration: it provides environments where participants can think critically about what sustainability means to them, without promising easy resolutions. As Grace articulated, the learning she hopes WWOOFers take away extends to fundamental ethics: "I would want people to understand... how important it is that... we learn to eat organic. That that's the way that we must treat the earth." This deeper understanding is complemented by relational learning, as she also noted, "You have to be tolerant, otherwise it just doesn't work... You have to be prepared for anything." From a volunteer's perspective, critical thinking can also extend to the operational sustainability of the farm itself. Declan, while WWOOFing at Valley Organic, observed the challenges arising from a lack of clear planning, concluding that hosts should, "Prioritise... when you do get volunteers, use them wisely... for worthwhile stuff." This relational, iterative process is ultimately what equips individuals and networks to respond creatively to the complex ethical questions that arise as people strive to live more responsibly within their ecosystems.

As a result, the lessons from WWOOF reach beyond any one farm or participant. They hint at broader possibilities for global networks that seek to bridge local actions with larger-scale sustainability aims, particularly those grounded in an ethics of care and dynamic resilience.

The shifting landscapes of environmental work require flexible mindsets, adaptive learning through relationships, and a willingness to embrace imperfection. WWOOF's experiences, interpreted ethnographically through everyday practices, relational exchanges, and responsive strategies, once again remind us that a sustainable future is an ongoing endeavor, not a fixed destination. It will be shaped by those who engage wholeheartedly, learn from tensions without dismissing them, and find renewed meaning in the simple acts of planting, nurturing, and sharing. Indeed, this understanding of sustainability as an evolving journey suggests that the close of this chapter is itself a new beginning for ongoing learning and engagement. This thesis therefore calls for a deeper appreciation of sustainability as a lived, negotiated, and contextually-rich practice, urging participants, organisations, and scholars alike to embrace adaptive strategies and ethical commitments that cultivate truly resilient, caring ecological connections in an uncertain world.

“Tidak rugi berbudi kepada tanah, kerana tanah tidak tipu...”

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Ethical Approval Documents

A note to the reader: The following documents (Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, etc.) are presented here exactly as they were approved by the Durham University Department of Anthropology ethics committee prior to the commencement of fieldwork in 2021. The project title and focus evolved during the course of the research, as is common in long-term ethnographic study. The final thesis title and refined research questions reflect the development of the project over time.

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: Exploring the Impacts of WWOOF Activities in Yorkshire And Humber

Researcher(s): Mohd Rezza Petra bin Azlan

Department: Anthropology

Contact details: 07542436119 / mohd.r.bin-azlan@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Ben Campbell

Supervisor contact details: ben.campbell@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD research at Durham University.

This study has received ethical approval from the Department of Anthropology ethics committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to understand the volunteering activity on organic farms. In this interview, you will be asked about your motivational factors of volunteering, and how you found out about the project.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in this study because you have been participating in WWOOF activities as volunteers / hosts. We are looking to recruit 20-30 participants for this study. You must also be happy to consent to be interviewed.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be asked to complete an interview which we estimate will take you 60 minutes. You may also wish to agree to a follow-up interview to find out more about your approach. **Although most legal restrictions in the UK have been lifted on 19 July 2021, we may consider alternative plans with online or telephone interviews if Covid-19 restrictions remain in place in the future.**

Are there any potential risks involved?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. The potential physical and/or psychological harm or distress will be the same as any experienced in everyday life.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will have a beneficial impact on how we understand the voluntourism activities on organic farms in the UK.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours.

However, if you agree to your real name being used in the study, we will not collect or ask you to provide any personal data. We will have no way of linking responses back to an individual.

Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

Results of the research will be published as a PhD dissertation. We also aim to publish the result in some other publication such as conferences and journals. You will not be identified in any report or publication unless you agree to do so in the consent form. If you wish to be given a copy of any reports resulting from the research, please ask us to put you on our circulation list.

All personal data in electronic form will be stored on a password protected computer and securely backed up using the University's One Drive online storage. Additionally, any hard copies will be kept in locked storage. Data will not be available to anyone outside the research team. All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after publication of the results / the end of the project / the end of active data collection (10 years is the standard under the University's data management policy but may vary).

For theses expected to be deposited in Durham e-Theses:

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's [Complaints Process](#).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the Impacts of WWOOF Activities in Yorkshire And Humber

Researcher(s): Mohd Rezza Petra bin Azlan

Department: Anthropology

Contact details: 07542436119 / mohd.r.bin-azlan@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Ben Campbell

Supervisor contact details: ben.campbell@durham.ac.uk

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Although most legal restrictions in the UK have been lifted on 19 July 2021, we may consider alternative plan with online or telephone interviews if Covid-19 restriction remain in place in the future.

Please tick (✓) each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [/ / 2021] and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I consent to being audio recorded / being video recorded / having my photo taken, and understand how recordings / photos will be used in research outputs.	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs using an assigned pseudonym.	

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____
(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____
Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____
(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS): MOHD REZZA PETRA BIN AZLAN

Debriefing Sheet

Project title: Exploring the Impacts of WWOOF Activities in Yorkshire And Humber

Thank you for taking part in this study. What I want to achieve in this research is to understand the voluntourism activity on organic farms. In order to understand what motivates people to join and stay involved, how the system of WWOOFers and WWOOF hosts works for mutual benefit, and to understand how this kind of work and travel combination has gained popularity. The study will then proceed to explore the perceived values and potential benefits that accrue to both parties.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data have been collected and analysed then please contact me at mohd.r.bin-azlan@durham.ac.uk. I cannot however provide you with your individual results.

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

WWOOF Volunteer Interview Guide

Background of the WWOOFer / Volunteer

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to be involved with WWOOF?
2. How did you first come across WWOOF or volunteering in the garden/farm?
3. Why did you want to be a WWOOFer or organic farm volunteer?
4. When did you start your volunteering?
5. Can you describe the roles you fulfilled when you were WWOOFing/volunteering?
6. How has your work experience prepared you for this position?
7. What other volunteering experience have you had?
8. Can you describe how the farm/garden operates as a growing system and as an enterprise?
9. Do you know who is the main customer for this farm?
10. How many farms do you normally volunteer at each year?
11. Do you have any connection with other WWOOFers or volunteers?
12. Are you registered with other organisations that facilitate volunteers (e.g. Workaway)?
13. What have you learned through your involvement with this farm?
14. How do you view the idea and the future of voluntourism on organic farms?
15. What is the system for feedback with your host? Does the host keep a visitor or guestbook for comments?

Questions about WWOOF Motivation

1. Why do you think WWOOFing or volunteering is a good match for you?
2. What has been your favourite and worst part of being a WWOOFer/volunteer?
3. Can you explain how WWOOFers/volunteers contribute to the farm?
4. How do you see WWOOFing activities benefiting volunteers?
5. Can you tell me about an aspect of a volunteer experience that you really enjoyed, and a part that you wish had been different?

Questions about Commitment to Organic Farms

1. Would you please describe a typical day of WWOOFing/volunteering?
2. How do you interact with other volunteers in terms of dividing the farm tasks?
3. On the farm, do hosts assist and teach the WWOOFers/volunteers?
4. Please explain the criteria you prefer when selecting an organic farm to volunteer at.
5. Please describe any event or time you faced a challenge during volunteering and how you overcame it.

Questions about Emotions, Values, and Relationships

1. How would you describe the relationship between you and the hosts, and other volunteers?
2. What strategies do you use to create better relationships with hosts and other volunteers?
3. How do you think the WWOOF experience affects volunteers?
4. What were the most valuable learning experiences during your WWOOFing/volunteering?
5. What do you think are the important things WWOOFers can learn from their stay?

Questions about WWOOF, Volunteering, and the Pandemic

1. Has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on you and your WWOOFing/volunteering activities?
2. Do you see any differences in WWOOF activities before and during the pandemic?
3. Can you explain how voluntourism/volunteering helped you during the pandemic?
4. How has the pandemic made you think differently about being a WWOOFer/volunteer?
5. Has the pandemic led you to think about new, flexible strategies for WWOOFing?
6. What three words would you use to describe your experience as a WWOOFer/volunteer on an organic farm?

WWOOF Host Interview Guide

Background of the Host

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to be involved with WWOOF?
2. How did you first come across WWOOF?
3. Why did you want to be a host in WWOOF?
4. When did you start your hosting?
5. Can you describe the roles you fulfil when hosting WWOOFers?
6. How has your work experience prepared you for this position?
7. What other host-volunteer experience have you had?
8. Can you describe how your farm/garden operates as a growing system and as an enterprise?
9. Do you host other groups of volunteers beyond WWOOFers?
10. Who is your most important customer? Is this a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programme?
11. How many volunteers do you normally host each year?
12. Do you have connections with other organic farms, WWOOF hosts, or support networks?
13. Are you registered with other organisations that facilitate volunteers, such as Workaway?
14. What organisations matter most to you as a host (e.g., for advice, funding, grants)?
15. What have you learned through your involvement with the WWOOF organisation?
16. How do you view the idea and future of voluntourism?
17. What is the system for feedback with your WWOOFers? Do you keep a visitor or guestbook for comments?

Questions about WWOOF Motivation

1. Why do you think this volunteering and hosting opportunity is a good match for you?
2. What has been your favourite and worst part of being a host?
3. Can you explain how WWOOF and WWOOFers contribute to your farm?
4. How do you see WWOOF benefiting the volunteers?
5. Can you tell me about an aspect of a volunteer experience that you really enjoyed, and one that you wish had been different?

Questions about Commitment to WWOOFers

1. Would you please describe a typical day of hosting WWOOFers?
2. How do you interact with volunteers when it comes to dividing the farm tasks?
3. How do you teach volunteers the farm jobs?
4. Please explain the criteria you prefer from a volunteer when accepting them to your farm.
5. Please describe any event or time you faced a challenge while hosting and how you overcame it.

Questions about Emotions, Values, and Relationships


1. How would you describe the relationship between you and the volunteers?
2. What strategies do you use to create better host-volunteer and volunteer-volunteer relationships?
3. How do you think the WWOOF experience affects volunteers? What qualities do you notice in them?
4. What were the most valuable learning experiences during your time as a host?
5. What do you think are the most important things WWOOFers can learn from their stay?

Questions about WWOOF, Volunteering, and the Pandemic

1. Has the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on you and your farm?
2. Do you see any difference in WWOOF activities before and during the pandemic?
3. Can you explain how voluntourism or volunteerism supported you during the pandemic?
4. How has the pandemic made you think differently about being a WWOOF host?
5. Has the pandemic led you to adopt new flexible strategies as a host?
6. What three words would you use to describe your experience as a WWOOF host?

Appendix C: List of YouTube Vlogs Analysed

1. A day in the life of a WWOOFer - Scottish Highlands
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jFSrJwDhcA>
2. Travel Cheap Working on Organic Farms | Normandy, France | WWOOF
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDoxAjGiD0c>
3. Pros and Cons of WWOOF and WorkAway
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdNav5nj4xA>
4. What is Wwoofing? Answering your questions - WWOOF UK
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29jkiRdPIMc>
5. LIVING AND WORKING ON AN ORGANIC FARM IN ITALY (WWOOF)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aq2VX5ueh3A>
6. My Horrible WWOOFing Experience | World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms Review
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq0kEO_s0nw
7. A Week in the Life // WWOOF Hawaii
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3AT2MV8HY8>
8. WWOOFING Experience Gone Wrong + Tips To Avoid Bad Volunteer | Australia
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GW61UbGeHo>
9. WWOOF Japan Experience + Tips
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08BPXQhrCH8>
10. WORKING ON A FARM IN ITALY (WWOOF) **
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wt4MILSeUsY>
11. day in the life of a WWOOFer | living on an organic farm for free!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK-vlfzMYQE>
12. [WWOOFING VLOG #1] SECOND WWOOFING IN KOREA! 🇰🇷
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8ZXPTthak6g>
13. MY EXPERIENCE WITH WWOOF
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDmaGOnjUp8>
14. WWOOF Experience In California
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rl3K_Xr0RaA
15. British WWOOF Reference 7 12
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xNH5n9u3a0>
16. WWOOF Japan - VLOG 6 Host 2/5
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4FoCWxBjxw>
17. Travel New Zealand Vlog #4 - First Wwoofing Experience
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzRQohE9tOQ>
18. Wwoofing Vlog in Covid 19 Era | Wisconsin Edition September (2020)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EvVK3PBBGc>
19. A day in the life of a WWOOFer
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkjkU42nzHY>
20. WWOOFing tips + advice
https://www.youtube.com/watch/nh_lOHJowHs

21. I Wwoof Because Growing Organic Food is Way Groovy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LShOR9k14>
22. MY WWOOF EXPERIENCE | advice for beginners + how to choose the right host
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpGFC4Rkj_s
23. The exploitative world of working holidays (aupairing, wwoofing, volunteering)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch/athKm3q9pF8>
24. BAD MOTHER, BAD WWOOFER, EXPLAIN YOURSELF
<https://www.youtube.com/watch/GGKJiT7HGk8>
25. Living For Free In Hawaii | WWOOFing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKJjuOr9Ss0>
26. How I Lived In Maui Hawaii For Free
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq9OIWVV8Iw>
27. WWOOFING IN TUSCANY FOR A MONTH .
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRIAXsDkj7s>
28. WWOOF Beginnings at Hawaii Flower Farm - Hawaii Ep. 3
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFrbYzkOUKA>
29. My Life on a Japanese Farm (WWOOF JAPAN)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxmY0Ub7yy8>
30. WWOOFing in New Zealand: Tips and Experience
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zvBcuR-_rw
31. My first WWOOF USA experience
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DhpJEQ7ka8>
32. WWOOF | 10 Tips for 1st Time WWOOFers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stmrzGXlhbE>
33. WWOOFING + WORKAWAY ADVICE | My Experiences in Hawaii, Spain and Thailand
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2iE8xnlHrI>
34. How to WWOOF While Traveling and Volunteering on a Budget
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SF_dmdK4i9Q

Appendix D: Supplementary Fieldwork Photographs

Figure D1



Note: Pictured here is the delicate process of “pricking out,” or transplanting young seedlings from a germination tray into individual modules for further growth.

Figure D2



Note: Transplanting a young hazelnut tree during a rain shower. The task illustrates the year-round, weather-independent nature of many farm duties.

Figure D3



Note: Seed heads hung to dry at Valley Organic. In permaculture and WWOOF contexts, seed saving is not only technical but also ethical and symbolic, often described as carrying the “memory” of place and soil across seasons.

Figure D4



Note: A volunteer prepares a large meal in the institutional-style kitchen at The Bridge Institute. This image, signposted in Chapter 5, illustrates the structured, large-scale communal cooking that is part of the daily routine at larger residential sites, where volunteers on a rotating duty system take on the responsibility of preparing food for up to 25 people.

Figure D5



Note: In contrast to the structured environment at The Bridge Institute (D1), this photograph shows a volunteer cooking in a more rustic, provisional kitchen at another farm. This image highlights the wide spectrum of living conditions and resourcefulness across the WWOOF network ranging from large, well-equipped facilities to more intimate, self-sufficient, or temporary setups.

Figure D6



Note: Signposted in Chapter 6, this image shows volunteers working on the roof of a new farm structure. It visually represents the kind of skilled, non-agricultural labour that can be a point of both aspiration and contention for volunteers like Declan, who sought meaningful pedagogical exchange but sometimes experienced such tasks as unfulfilling when mentorship was lacking.

Figure D7



Note: In a complementary scene, this photograph shows me as a WWOOFer engaged in deconstruction work in an old building. The plywood flooring being removed here were salvaged and later repurposed for the barn construction seen in the previous image. This pairing highlights the full cycle of labour involved, from resourceful reclaiming of materials in suburban settings to skilled assembly in rural ones, and illustrates how volunteer tasks often extend far beyond traditional agricultural work.

Figure D8



Note: In this single frame, Grace presents a powerful lesson in cross-cultural knowledge transfer by displaying two functionally distinct hoes. In her left hand, she holds a Jembe, a heavy-duty East African draw hoe she adopted from her time teaching in Tanzania. With its large, robust blade set at a sharp angle, this tool is designed for powerful, axe-like swings to break hard ground, dig, and clear tough vegetation. In her left hand, for direct comparison, she holds a much smaller, lighter-bladed hoe typical of many British gardens. This type of tool is generally intended for lighter work, such as weeding or cultivating soil that has already been tilled.

Appendix E: Digital & AI-Assisted Writing Workflow

Introduction

This appendix provides a transparent account of the digital and AI-assisted tools that supported the preparation of this thesis. This declaration is included to uphold the principles of academic integrity and to align with emerging best practices across the UK higher education sector. The use of these tools was discussed and agreed upon with my supervisory team, and my methodology ensured that I, the author, retained full intellectual control over the final work.

Overview of Tools Used

Tool	Stage(s) Used	Purpose	My Oversight / How I Used the Output
Google Translate	Early drafting	Initial rough translation of passages from Malay to English.	Reviewed every segment line-by-line; corrected meaning, idiom, and technical terms. Treated output as a working scaffold, not finished prose.
ChatGPT (OpenAI)	Later drafting & revision	Grammar, clarity, and tone enhancement; checking coherence of my own arguments.	Critically evaluated all suggestions; rewrote outputs into my own disciplinary voice. Never used to generate original content or analysis.
Connecting Papers	Literature review scoping	Mapped related publications to identify topic clusters and potential research gaps.	Used as a discovery aid only. Read all original papers before citing.
Grammarly / MS Word Editor	Final polishing	Routine proofreading for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	Manual accept/reject of minor stylistic and grammatical suggestions.

Representative Prompts Used with ChatGPT

The prompts used were designed to elicit suggestions for linguistic improvement, not to generate content. The following are representative examples of my interactions:

- "Translate the following Malay phrase '[insert phrase]' into an appropriate English academic equivalent in the context of [specify context]."
- "Please review the following paragraph. Identify any sentences that are grammatically incorrect or awkwardly phrased for a UK academic audience and suggest alternative wording."
- "Can you help me rephrase this sentence to be more concise while preserving the original meaning?"
- "The following paragraph feels a bit clunky. Can you suggest some ways to improve the flow and sentence structure?"

Critical Reflection on AI Use (Benefits and Limitations)

In line with my supervisors' advice to reflect on the process, this section outlines the advantages and disadvantages I identified when using these tools.

Benefits:

- **Enabled Bilingual Drafting:** The tools made it "doable" to think and draft in my native language before efficiently moving into English for supervision and editing.
- **Improved Readability:** They helped enhance the clarity and grammatical precision of my writing for an academic audience.
- **Diagnostic Aid:** At times, if an AI tool misinterpreted a paragraph I had written, it served as a useful signal that my original argument needed to be clarified.

Limitations and Cautions:

- **Loss of Nuance:** Machine translation and paraphrasing can flatten culturally specific concepts. I had to constantly re-insert nuance and correct overly literal translations.
- **Risk of Inaccuracy:** AI tools can "hallucinate" or invent information. I never accepted any factual or bibliographic suggestions without independent verification.
- **Maintaining Authorial Voice:** Over-reliance on AI suggestions risked smoothing my prose into a generic tone. I had to consciously edit and rewrite all outputs to ensure the final text reflected my own scholarly voice and ethnographic texture.

- **Data Privacy:** I remained mindful of data security and avoided pasting sensitive or confidential participant data into public AI platforms.

Final Affirmation of Authorship and Responsibility

While AI tools participated in the linguistic refinement of this thesis, the intellectual contribution, including all research, data, analysis, arguments, and conclusions is entirely my own. I affirm that I have critically vetted all content for accuracy and originality. I take full and final responsibility for the scholarly integrity of this work.