

# Alice in WWOOFerLand:

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Exploring  
Symbiotic Worlds  
Beyond Tourism

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dissertation by

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Submitted to the Graduate School  
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in fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

29th August 2011



### **Certification of Originality**

I, Adrian Deville, certify that the work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree at any other institution. This work is my original work, while all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A. Deville', is placed over a light blue rectangular background.

Date: 29<sup>th</sup> August 2011



## Inspirations

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Is it wicked to take a pleasure in spring and other seasonal changes? To put it more precisely, is it politically reprehensible, while we are all groaning, or at any rate ought to be groaning, under the shackles of the capitalist system, to point out that life is frequently more worth living because of a blackbird's song, a yellow elm tree in October, or some other natural phenomenon which does not cost money and does not have what the editors of left-wing newspapers call a class angle? There is not doubt that many people think so.

George Orwell, 1946

"The ultimate end to a growth economy is the same as an analogous growth: cancer. But for national economies, the victims are nature, soils, forests, people, water, and quality of life. There is one, and only one solution, and we have almost no time to try it. We must turn all our resources to repairing the natural world, and train all our young people to help. They want to; we need to give them this last chance to create forests, soils, clean waters, clean energies, secure communities, stable regions, and to know how to do it from hands-on experience".

Bill Mollison (co-founder of Permaculture)

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Aldo Leopold 1949

"When I get home, I shall write a book about this place. If I... If I ever do get home"

*Alice (in Wonderland).*



## Acknowledgments

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Gina did not know *exactly* what we were in for when this project began, or more precisely, when she agreed to take part in it. Now we know. Not only have we survived it, we have emerged stronger, better, happier. My profound thanks to you for everything you have put in and put on hold.

The time taken to make this thesis is almost exactly the same as the age of my son Mani. The preparation of this work underpins his construction of me as his father, and my construction of him as my son. My attempts to be a good father hopefully explain why this work took so long to produce. Thanks buddy.

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Thanks Sam☆ and Rowena 'I' for reminding me that it's "only a PhD".

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## Abstract

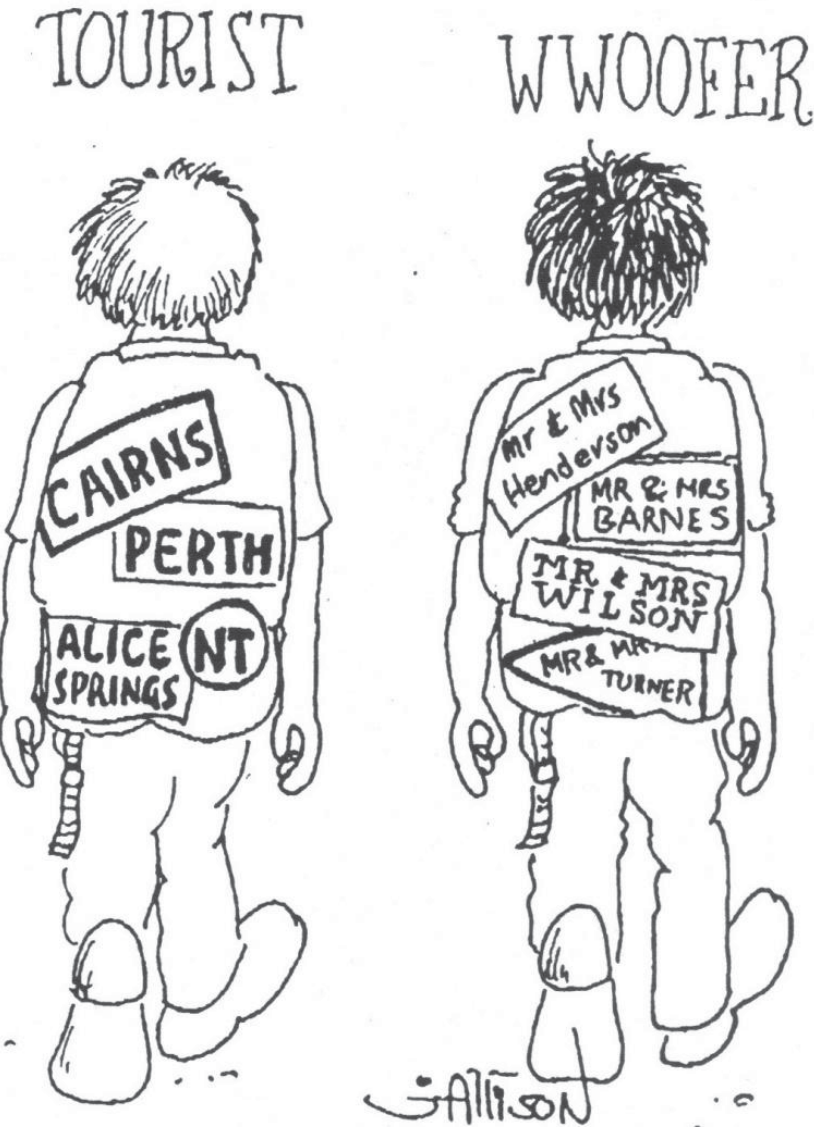
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'Willing Workers on Organic Farms' (WWOOFing) emerged in the UK in the early 1970s as a means of supporting the organic farming movement and fostering knowledge about its practices, but since that time has steadily become closely entwined with practices of independent global travelling. Current membership is heavily dominated by long term budget travellers and very limited existing research has largely portrayed WWOOFing in terms of farm tourism or the differentiation of more general trends among experience seeking backpackers in search of more 'authentic', more intimate encounters with other cultures. While there is certainly utility in such approaches to comprehending WWOOFing, this study endeavours to situate WWOOFing in a more thorough exploration of perspectives of participants.

Using surveys, interviews and participant observation of hosts and WWOOFers in Australia, a wide range of data is brought together and interpreted by means of a constructivist grounded theory approach to knowledge generation. The overall aim of this thesis is to understand *what WWOOFing is about*. By undertaking close analysis and interpretation of the perspectives of those involved, the subject of WWOOFing has been approached in conjunction with, rather than as a subset of the phenomenon of tourism in order to allow for the important perspective for some that WWOOFing is about *transcending* tourism: being based on interpersonal exchange and normative mechanisms of reciprocity, WWOOFing experiences are commonly perceived as characteristically different from those of 'tourism' experiences based upon fee-for-service forms of reciprocity. In terms of host-guest relations particularly, the structure of WWOOFing experiences and the primacy of 'sincerity' and 'existential authenticity' in WWOOFing encounters are shown to facilitate the creation and occupation of spaces that can directly generate mutually beneficial exchanges for all the selves involved, evoking MacCannell's ideal 'Neo-Nomads' of tourism in the postmodern era, crossing cultural boundaries as welcome(d) "imaginative travellers".

This study finds that though WWOOFing is now largely the domain of 'tourists', it is also ultimately and paradoxically it's 'exact opposite' which appears as a reflected, mirror image of it. WWOOFing has always operated 'beyond the looking glass', outside of tourism, while yet being attractive to tourists and opening up to them and embracing them as they seek a range of things, including for some, conscious 'refuge' from a touristic world. In exploring the ways in which WWOOFing acts to facilitate

transcendence of 'tourism', and while acknowledging there is a degree of liminal amorphousness between tourism and non-tourism, this study contributes to an ontological reframing of tourism. In doing so, it brings into consideration novel insights into the relationship between power, authenticity and sustainability in the tourism context, with significant implications for understandings of 'best practice' sustainable tourism.



"Wwoofers versus Tourists" (Pollard 1996)