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WWOOFing: An inexpensive way to travel and expand knowledge

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A chicken is seen in the coupe at Flagstaff EcoRanch. (Photo by J. Daniel Hud)

Programs such as study abroad, house-swap or hostel labor are efficient ways to travel in a somewhat inexpensive way. Another way to travel inexpensively is through an exchange program known as World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF).

While WWOOFing is not as well-known, it is a program that promotes travel and further knowledge about sustainable agriculture. WWOOFers will travel to a farm of their choice and spend time helping the host family with daily activities and projects. In return, the host family will provide housing, food and opportunities to learn about organic lifestyles on farms across the globe.

Biology professor Jeff Meilander founded Flagstaff's EcoRanch, a local farm housing WWOOFers from across the states and occasionally across seas. Meilander organizes and schedules WWOOFer projects depending on the day and what needs to be done.

"In my experiences of WWOOFing, you kind of show up to a farm and you don't really know what to expect," Meilander said. "You don't know if that description is accurate and if you're going to be doing the things that are on it, so it's a little bit unknown with the things you are going to do."

Meilander worked on several farms in Patagonia and Chile through the WWOOF program.

"The EcoRanch itself was born out of my WWOOFing experiences in South America," Meilander said. "I would definitely recommend it."

EcoRanch has been thriving for two years and WWOOFers are always welcome to volunteer on the farm. WWOOFers are scheduled to do anything from going to the farmers market, to selling food, harvesting or weighing, fixing fences, digging or even cleaning the house. The EcoRanch is a 1.7-acre farm.

"Somebody might say it's a very large garden," Meilander said. "We only farm on probably a quarter of an acre."

Despite the small size, last year EcoRanch produced over 2,000 pounds of produce. One thousand pounds were sold in town to make veggie burgers that would be distributed to restaurants including Flagstaff's own Diablo Burger and Mama Burger.

"A lot of people come into farms with the idea: 'well, I'm only here for a week, so it's not going to make much of a difference.' But, it actually does," Meilander said. "I hope people will understand that a little bit more because when they show up to work hard . . . the people on the farms would appreciate their work a little more."

Most WWOOFing farms like the EcoRanch thrive off the success of these projects. In order to succeed, some farms need extra hands, which is how WWOOFing came about in 1971. Anyone can apply to be a WWOOFer or a farm host with an application on the WWOOF website: <https://wwoofusa.org>.

Senior early childhood education major Katherine Ciaccio joined the WWOOF program and worked abroad in Sweden on two farms in July 2013.

“It was a great way to travel rather than staying in the big city hostels,” Ciaccio said.

While each farm is different, Ciaccio worked on a traditional animal farm as well as a fruit and dairy farm.

“It was really interesting seeing how different Sweden is and experiencing the process of getting getting acclimated, but then so quickly having to go somewhere else again,” Ciaccio said.

Ciaccio traveled to Sweden with Collin D’Aloisi, a junior computational and applied mathematics major at the University of Chicago. D’Aloisio found out about the WWOOF program through his stepfather, a farmer in Benson, Ariz.

“I learned a lot in Sweden about permaculture, sustainable farming and organic techniques,” D’Aloisio said. “It was a great experience overall.”

Each farm taught different farming techniques and required different tasks. The animal farm was recently established so Ciaccio and D’Aloisio picked crops, moved plant and herb gardens and painted a barn.

“The hardest project was definitely painting a barn by hand,” D’Aloisio said. “We didn’t have very big brushes, and it was a long process.”

WWOOFing can be seen as a similar opportunity as study abroad programs, but it requires different responsibilities.

“A study abroad is a little more rigid in what you’re expecting as curriculum and things are mapped out for you,” Meilander said. “With farming, you just kind of take it a day at a time because you might be doing one project one day and another project another day. It definitely fluctuates.”

Although the workload is different with each program, the housing conditions are surprisingly similar. EcoRanch encourages WWOOFers to camp in the warm season, but will also offer space inside the house.

“A lot of my friends who do study abroad do the homestay option and that’s kind of exactly what WWOOFing is like,” Ciaccio said. “We had all the meals with the family and worked with the family, so it was really just bonding with them rather than where we were.”

Study abroad is more focused on study and travel, whereas WWOOFing is central around farm culture, getting to know the host family and helping with various projects.

“You learn where your food comes from, or at least where good food comes from,” D’Aloisio said. “You get a lot of good experience in manual labor, which is helpful in all aspects of life. It’s also just a great inexpensive way to travel, and meet great people.”

Although WWOOFing has been a travel option for some time now, it is still an uncommon practice among college students.

“There are so many options out there that so many people don’t realize,” Ciaccio said. “You can work anywhere if you just seek it out. It’s really easy and they want you to be on their farm to help, so it’s really an exchange of work and everyone’s happy at the end of it.”