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WWOOF activities in Japan: Potential for edifying and non-monetary tourism

（日本の WWOOF 活動：啓発的・非貨幣的ツーリズムのポテンシャル）

WWOOF was commenced in 1971 in England by a small group of city people seeking access to rural areas, nature and organic food. WWOOF stands for “World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms”, and national WWOOF organizations had in 2014 spread to 50 countries, including Japan. The WWOOF system involves a non-monetary exchange between two cohorts of people: Hosts and WWOOFers. Hosts, who have a farm or other place at which they can provide WWOOFers with a place to sleep, three meals daily, and mutually supportive engagement amongst the family and other people at their place. And WWOOFers, who go to stay at Hosts’ places. Hosts provide WWOOFers with a means to participate in the activities done at the Host’s place, that WWOOFers are happy to engage and learn from in return for receiving a place to sleep, meals and friendship. In concert with learning new skills, especially Hosts in rural areas appreciate WWOOFers’ help with activities that are typically done on farms. WWOOFers browse the list of Hosts, then choose and directly negotiate with Hosts including in relation to when to go, and duration of stay. There is no overseeing authority involved. WWOOF is seen as part of movements of people seeking self-sufficiency, organic food, and increased happiness, similar to agritourism and back-to-the-land living.

Each national WWOOF association is independent. WWOOF activities in the world have and continue to grow significantly, both in terms of the number of WWOOFers, and the number of Hosts. Most WWOOF organizations including that in Japan do not advertise, and overwhelmingly WWOOFers and Hosts find out about WWOOF by word-of-mouth. Since commencing in 2002, WWOOF in Japan has and continues to grow commensurate with this world growth trend.

Previous WWOOF related research included that into the concept of WWOOF, and the functioning of WWOOF in countries including Argentina, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. No research has been done in relation to the activities associated with WWOOF in Japan.

The objective of this thesis has been to analyze Host and WWOOFer characteristics in relation to the WWOOF organization in Japan, based on data that both cohorts of applicants submitted to apply to join, from 2002 to 2014, in addition to surveys answered by WWOOFers, and unstructured interviews of representatives to national WWOOF organizations, and international organizations.

Between 2002 and 2014 there were 808 Host applications to join WWOOF in Japan. In the case of Hosts, approximately half the applications did not complete their application, pay, and become an active Host.

During the same period, 25,133 people applied to join in Japan as WWOOFers. The Host and WWOOFer data utilized, related to the year of application. WWOOFer data analyses showed the following.

In 2002 there were 149 active WWOOFers, and in 2016 that number had grown to 450. WWOOFer age included children, to people in their 60s and beyond. The largest age cohort at 70% was people in their 20s. Most younger WWOOFers were students, understood on the basis that they had free time and appreciated the low cost to join at 5,500 yen per year. WWOOFer livelihood was largely represented by layback careers such as artists and photographers, and people seeking new lifestyles. WWOOFer gender distribution showed females well represented at 59%. WWOOFer nationality was 32% Japanese – the remaining 68% non-Japanese – and many of the latter were international tourists and students. WWOOFers from developing countries of China and Thailand were well represented, and from developed countries the USA and Britain. Sixty-four percent of WWOOFers stayed at a Host's place from one week to one month, and some for more than four months. Ninety-eight percent of WWOOFers stated they had 'good experiences'. WWOOFer motivation included non-monetary exchange, learning, diversity of experience, engaging local communities, and happiness. Finally, WWOOF is bridging the divide between urban and rural areas.

Host data analyses showed in 2002 there were 20 active Hosts, and in 2013 that number had increased to 425. WWOOF Hosts were situated in every prefecture. Hokkaido had the most Hosts, understood because of wild beauty and farming, at almost 16%. The most common type of Host was farms and food making places, at about 37%. Many farms were at least partially organic. The next most common type of Host was nature school, tour guide, cultural exchange, and restaurant.

Recurrent themes in the research were those of reciprocated support, organic food, health, happiness, self-sufficiency, freedom and learning. WWOOF organization representatives, Hosts and WWOOFers wanted to be responsible for and free in their lives. Rural areas were critical to give space for people to meet, places for WWOOFers to sleep, and low cost of living.

An important difference between WWOOF in Japan, and in other countries, is the emphasis that representatives in Japan placed on regular contact with Hosts, to check that Hosts and WWOOFers have had good experiences. A major attraction of WWOOF was the non-monetary exchange, and the low cost of membership. The research analyzed this to be both part of, and facilitating, bottom-up social development.

The research has revealed the circumstances associated with WWOOF in Japan, showing its similarity to but difference from movements such as agritourism and back-to-the-land living, and that WWOOF in Japan has since 2002 grown rapidly. A rich tapestry of human interaction has been articulated. In conclusion, WWOOF in Japan is driving cooperation between people from disparate backgrounds – including that of nationality and language, gender, occupation and city and country toward bridging the urban rural divide – and has potential for continued growth in edifying and non-monetary tourism.