

WWOOFING

I walked round the side of the house, past a jumbled potting shed and knocked on the door. It was opened almost at once by a grey haired man with bushy eyebrows, thick woollen socks and ancient denim shorts. "Eila, our WWOOFer has arrived," he called out excitedly, then to me, "Welcome to Rimu Farm, I'm Don," and threw his arms out and gave me a bear hug.

The WWOOF scheme (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms – previously Willing Workers on Organic Farms) began in the UK in 1971. It's a labour

exchange programme that helps "people share more sustainable ways of living," and New Zealand joined in 1974. Now, there are over 1000 wwoofing hosts in New Zealand and thousands more in over 50 countries.

Volunteers work four to six hours a day/five to six days a week in exchange for food and accommodation from their hosts. Hosts "grow organically, are in conversion, or use ecologically sound methods on their land," and include farms, ventures in self sufficiency, communities, conservation projects and market gardens.

The success of wwoofing depends on mutual cooperation and the benefits are huge. The wwoofer learns wide-ranging self sufficiency skills, they can experience life on organic properties and, because many wwoofers are travellers, they can lessen their environmental footprint by putting something back. Hosts receive help with their projects and meet like-minded people from all over the world. Hosts with families have also mentioned the beneficial impact wwoofers have on their children, especially if they live in remote rural areas or home-school their kids.

On paying a joining fee (\$40 for New Zealand) you receive a wwoof book and access to the online database of host's contact details. Each host writes about the kind of projects they run; jobs you can expect to do; wwoofer they'd like (non-smoking/vegetarian etc); and how many wwoofers they can accommodate at any one time (singles, couples, families etc). Then it's simple. Just phone or email the ones you like the sound of and organise your visit. It's vital to make advance arrangements and discuss what expectations you have for the exchange – don't just turn up on the doorstep.

In the end I stayed with Don and Eila Hopkirk at Rimu Farm near Stratford for two weeks and tackled their overgrown maze of a garden, explored the farm on quad bikes, and helped their neighbour muster cattle on horseback. It was wwoofing at its best and I could have stayed for months. Most of all, it was amazing to be in a foreign country and find ourselves in the warm heart of such a beautiful family. I'd recommend wwoofing to anyone.

- Penny Jones

See www.wwoof.org or www.wwoof.co.nz
for more information



DAVID WILLIAMS

Wwoofers participate in all manner of jobs, including rounding up the sheep