

Cash makes new immigration laws

New law blindly punishes volunteers and small organic farms

By Henrike Schreer

Each year, thousands of highly skilled young professionals, mainly from Europe, Japan and Canada, come to Australia on the Working Holiday Visa program to spend a year travelling, working and trying to gain sponsorship and stay for good – 145 000 just in the last year. Over the last years, they had the chance to extend this opportunity by another year by completing 88 days of farm work in remote areas. The law allowed 2nd Year Visa applicants to perform either paid or volunteer work, and thus greatly benefitted many small and medium size organic farms who can't afford to pay additional workers, but are happy to provide food, accommodation and a uniquely Aussie experience to their young guests, as well as teach them about sustainable organic farming techniques.

Immigration's Assistant Minister Michaelia Cash has now decided to scrap this model due to Fair Work concerns. The young workers, many of whom were happy to travel, gain insights into organic, healthy lifestyle and in return volunteer their skills, are now only eligible for a 2nd Year Visa if they can provide payslips. This will massively reduce available spots and eradicate opportunities on small farms, as most of them can't afford to add a wage to the expenses for food and lodging.

"We have been completely taken by surprise by this paradigm shift." Says Henrike Schreer, who manages the volunteer program at the Krishna Village Eco Yoga Community, one of the biggest volunteer hosts in NSW. "We have currently 35 volunteers who help us run our organic gardens and orchards, and another 40 booked in to come over the next 6 months. They are understandably very distressed about this sudden change in events, and so are we. I'm getting asked all the time and don't know what to tell them, since not even the Immigration info line is able to tell us what this is about, and when the new rules enter into effect."

As a non-for-profit, the Krishna Farm doesn't sell its produce, but provides daily vegetarian meals to its own farm community and the broader public - visitors are welcome to come along and join the meals for free. "Our volunteer project is not commercial, but aims to promote a healthy, balanced, sustainable lifestyle" says Schreer, whose Krishna Village has evolved into a retreat focused on health and spirituality over the course of the last year. "We provide daily yoga classes, spiritual opportunities, life coaching classes and much more to our retreat guests – and our volunteers are welcome to join all these activities for free. We are not paying them, but when they leave they often say they have had one of the most profound experiences of their life. To accuse all volunteer projects of exploitative intentions, notwithstanding any quality control, and at the same time assuming that paid work on a factory farm automatically means Fair Work is turning a blind eye on the real issues."

"Most volunteer hosts are small, self sustaining farmers who only sell a bit of produce at the local market." states Garry Ainsworth, Executive Director of WWOOF Australia, one of the main organisations helping volunteers to find suitable farm stays. "We have an aging population of farmers who find it harder and harder to sustain themselves on their farms. Having volunteer help allows them to stay on their farms and contribute to society, while providing a wonderful intercultural experience for their overseas visitors."

Over the last years, both Ainsworth and the Krishna Village crew have heard quite a few stories about unethical farmers who have threatened or deceived volunteers. "There are definitely dodgy farmers out there, but they are a minority" they agree, "and the new law will change nothing about that. If I'm being molested or forced to work ridiculous hours, a minimum wage will not help me."

What is really needed is a functioning quality control system that monitors all hosts for Fair Work exchange, so volunteers can make sure not to get themselves into a bad experience.”

“We have encouraged volunteers who have had bad experiences in the past to complain about unethical hosts, but usually they are too scared to lose their chance for a visa to speak up. If the farm denies that they have been there for the claimed amount of days, they will not be granted a visa, so they stay quiet,” says Schreer. “If the government wanted to really make a stand for Fair Work, it would put measures in place to prevent abuse and unethical conduct instead of scrapping some of the best outcomes this program has achieved. What’s needed is a list of approved farms, provided by a recognised body – and an official public complaints policy that provides a safe way for visa applicants to stand up for their rights.”

“We need to remember how vital small farms are to our local communities.” adds Garry Ainsworth. “As the land is being bought up and turned into mega farms, rural communities die – and that effects all of us. We have a wonderful opportunity at hand to teach the next generation about biodynamic farming and sustainable lifestyle. Most of these travellers are from cities and have never held a spade or planted, harvested and eaten their own food. That’s an experience factory farms can’t provide – and those will be the only providers left if this new law enters into effect.”

The Krishna Village volunteer program will survive, even if the farm might no longer be able to sign off 2nd Year Visa applicants. “We are in the lucky position that our program has created such attraction that people apply months in advance to come along.” says Henrike Schreer. “Many of our volunteers aren’t even eligible for the visa, but they still want to come along and be a part of our community. It’s a shame that here they enthusiastically contribute to a sustainable, organic farming project, but soon will have to leave early so they can go and work at a conventional factory farm to get their visa days signed off. We absolutely welcome and support Ms. Cash’s effort to put measures into place that ensure Fair Work, but this quick fix solution is not addressing the real issue, and instead throwing out the baby with the bathwater.”

Henrike Schreer is a Life Coach and NLP Master Practitioner and manages the Krishna Village Eco Yoga Community, a spiritual retreat centre that offers daily yoga classes, wellness treatments, yoga teacher training and massage courses.

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