

**Voluntourism in Cross-Cultural Contexts:
Critical Issues and the Case for International Volunteer Development and Management**

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Abstract

Voluntourism, the combination of volunteering efforts with tourism, has emerged as a popular option for individuals to combine volunteering with an international experience. With growth stemming largely from endorsements in the tourism industry, the phenomenon of voluntourism presents a number of complications in the areas of cultural competency and developmental aid in international communities. These issues are further complicated by the intersection of volunteerism's focus on aid and tourism's focus on entertainment. The goal of this discussion is to engage the field in a critical examination of the implications of voluntourism on the communities in which it operates, issues in management and development of voluntourists, and ways in which the volunteer development community can contribute to this growing area.

Key Words: cross-cultural, cultural competency, volunteer tourism, international, voluntourism.

Volunteering is a social process, requiring various levels of intercultural communication and cross-cultural interaction. In the field of sociocultural and international educational development, this combination of the volunteer/volunteering program and the context of the international environment is a common issue in generating programs and projects abroad. These programs have often relied on the use of international experts as well as influence from volunteers through programs such as the Peace Corps and international bodies such as UNESCO and affiliated non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The allure and practice of venturing beyond one's societal and national border has increased in recent years as growing numbers of potential volunteers travel abroad through a host of new and emerging programs (with a generous push from the tourism industry). With this transnational phenomenon, however, comes a host of

issues from the fields of international development and volunteering – issues that seem to be exacerbated in programs that lend themselves to the specific genre of voluntourism.

What is Voluntourism?

The international and cross-cultural experiences described above are part of a growing phenomenon referred to as volunteer tourism. “Voluntourism” (as it is known in the organizations that support it) combines tourism with volunteer work at the location of choice (Barbieri, Santos, & Katsube 2012; Kumaran & Pappas, 2012). “Voluntourists” may complete a project as the main goal of their trip or the project may play a secondary role to the leisure experience. In the case of professional organization volunteers (i.e., Peace Corps and mission trips), the service aspect is the larger component of their time abroad, whereas programs that offer a small segment

of time working within a community project for a non-committed traveler as part of a greater tourist leisure package would be classified on the more touristic end of the continuum. It is this latter half of the continuum that forms the growing trends in voluntourism.

Voluntourism is often addressed in conjunction with the concept of sustainable tourism – a growing trend in tourism in which would-be tourists select a destination and activities in a way that limits or reduces the negative impacts of tourism on local environments or seeks to negate these impacts through activities that provide positive inputs for the community (Brown & Hall, 2008; Palacios, 2010). These events range from sports event volunteering to welfare programs such as school construction and environmental conservation. Most voluntourists are drawn to the process for the opportunity to participate in alternatives to mainstream tourism as well as to achieve personal development through experiences with new and differing cultures, especially within locations in the third world (Brown & Hall, 2008; Kumaran & Pappas, 2012). Voluntourism projects generally consist of the voluntourist, who has traveled to the host location, and the local host, who serves as the guide and point of contact and lead of the project. Hosts may or may not be employed by an external agency and often have responsibilities specific to the experience of the voluntourist group. The process, however, is unbalanced, with a majority of the success providing better experiences and results for the voluntourist rather than the host (Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008).

Voluntourists are typically younger individuals, usually seeking international opportunities in “gap years” or after significant life changes (Brown & Hall, 2008). The phenomenon is international,

with a large number of voluntourists stemming from Europe, North America, and Australia. These individuals seek out voluntourism as an opportunity to voyage to exotic or rarely traveled locations and make connections with local groups and communities. Programs and activities are provided through a variety of organizations, including specific non-profit groups and travel agencies. Travel-based industries such as airlines and tourist resorts provide a significant source of encouragement for voluntourists to seek volunteer opportunities abroad (such as the voluntourism-focused site www.voluntourism.org) (Kumaran & Pappas, 2012).

Critical Issues for Volunteer and Program Development

Although there are positive aspects to the volunteer tourism phenomenon, the process is flawed in terms of volunteer and program development. First and foremost, its credibility as a positive volunteer force is debated (Palacios, 2010). Voluntourism seems to be the product of the tourism industry rather than having origins in volunteer and nonprofit arenas. Voluntourism “packages” are typically organized by tourist agencies and focus on providing the ultimate product package for the adventurous tourist. The process of travel and volunteer enjoyment are the predominant concern – not the completion of the volunteer task or project. As a result of this emphasis, sites lack the preparation and structure of a developed volunteer management program which often results in deficient volunteer organization and evaluation (Barbieri et al., 2012).

As a result of these roots, voluntourism research typically arises from the field of tourism and hospitality management. There is little overall research in the realm of voluntourism, with a gross majority of the limited writings being overly

optimistic and focusing on the marketing side of what appears to be a largely tourism-driven phenomenon (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Research focuses on the voluntourist as a point of marketing and business, with most research seeking to ascertain volunteer motivations and investigate experiences in an effort to encourage the phenomenon in a business generating motive (Sin, 2010). Guttentag (2009) supports this conclusion, stating that this interest “seems to derive from a marketing-type goal of better understanding volunteer tourists so that their needs can be better met” (p. 540), with a majority of studies being largely descriptive of voluntourists and their tastes.

This focus on the enjoyment of the voluntourist in the tourism promotion sense leaves little room for discussions of volunteer development. Due to the nature of the process taking place in a foreign country, volunteer tourism is highly episodic (Barbieri et al., 2012). Volunteers may spend a large amount of time in a specific area working on a specific project, but rarely do they return for future work. Entertainment seems to be a goal placed higher in this model than in typical volunteer development and management models. Volunteers enter the worksite as a component event tied to the expectation of a leisure/travel experience and then return home. There is no volunteer base or steady replenishment of volunteers. Participation is based on trends in travel and tourism and not on the typical elements of volunteer retention strategies and maintenance.

Volunteer tourism is also saturated with concerns in local relationships. Guttentag (2009) discusses a number of these negative impacts as they relate to the host country and community. Volunteer tourists are often untrained in the work they are sent to complete and may limit or increase the amount of productive work completed by host individuals participating

in the project. Some (although little) research does focus on the experiences and motivation of the local communities, but this research seems inconclusive and rare at best. Discussions of context and social issues in the community are limited if present at all and are often discussed in terms of relating to local engagement with voluntourists and voluntourist engagement with the experience (Dykhuis, 2010; Sherraden et al., 2008). In addition, local communities and stakeholders may be offered little say in the process or components of the projects.

Guttentag also brings into question the developmental factor. Voluntourists have the potential to decrease employment and resources in host communities by providing services for free. This work furthers the concept of developmental aid – providing services to others in terms of development but not necessarily providing the tools and capacities to succeed – and could potentially increase dependency. Local hosts are further objectified as the “other” in a process that makes the voluntourist a type of explorer moving freely within the native communities’ boundaries. Palacios’ (2010) work further supports this observation, discussing the language of voluntourism as closer to developmental aid versus intercultural understanding. The object appears to be helping the perceived “less fortunate” and less about understanding cultural and political influences and struggles. Tourism, although highly beneficial for bringing funding into an area, has the capacity to bring with it a host of negative influences and therefore is inadequate and inappropriate for the task of development (Brown & Hall, 2008).

Finally (and perhaps of most debate in the discussion of negative effects of voluntourism), there is a neocolonial complication inherent in the process of volunteering in welfare-based programs

internationally (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Sherraden et al., 2008). Foreign voluntourists, typically coming from backgrounds of privilege more often than not, inhabit the host community for the duration of the project as an act of leisure and often not at the bequest of the host community. Most voluntourists pay for the opportunity to participate, the travel costs, and oftentimes the project itself (Kumaran & Pappas, 2012). In a Central American example, Mahrouse (2011) describes the experience of a priest working with voluntourism in his community. The priest, who had been made responsible for the voluntourists' endeavors, was less than willing to work with the group. In his opinion, a donation of the high cost used on transportation to and from the destination as well as housing costs would do more good for the community than the volunteer work completed by the tourists. In this sense, the volunteer tourist's leisure/work experience is imposing upon the host community – a community that is often less privileged than the volunteer's own (Sin, 2010).

These patterns replicate the use of underdeveloped areas as a means of leisure. The background of voluntourists and/or the programs set up in foreign communities creates a problematic power dynamic between the voluntourist and the voluntoured. The process creates an exaggerated dichotomy between the voluntourist and the cultural "other" and may increase levels of cultural/social stereotyping on the part of the voluntourist in relation to the native group culture (Mahrouse, 2011; Raymond & Hall, 2008).

Furthermore, there is a gross imbalance between voluntourist traffic from developed areas such as Europe, Australia, and North America to the third world "south" locations such as Africa and South America (Brown & Hall, 2008). These border crossings and events bring negative

effects to the developing nations they serve and a number of social justice transgressions, largely due to the volunteer-centered leisure and tourism goal of the programs (Mahrouse, 2011), a combination that does not marry seamlessly and without debate. Volunteer tourists working in areas or communities that are perceived as developmentally inferior to the volunteer's native country may view the community in a sympathetic rather than empathetic light and begin to see themselves in a missionary-type role (Guttentag, 2009).

Brown and Hall (2008) and Sin's (2010) findings support the issues and complications of this form of "pro-poor" tourism, where the industry seeks to utilize tourism as a force to alleviate poverty and other social welfare issues. Through this motivation as a form of sustainable tourism, voluntourism programs seek to provide events that serve the voluntourist's sense of welfare action. Mahrouse (2011), however, refers to this process of volunteering as a "feel good opportunity" designed by nonmembers and not work done with or for the community in which it is situated. The voluntourist is presented as the provider and "do-gooder" in a "voyeuristic tour of poverty" (Dykhuis, 2010, p. 21). Voluntourists motivations in these nations are often "driven by a desire for moral comfort and reinforce positions of innocence" (Mahrouse, 2011, p. 386).

Implications for Volunteer Development and Future Work

The dispute about the expenditure of resources involved in travel versus the value of the work completed in combination with the focus on leisure over work brings into question the value of the volunteer experience. The voluntourism process, with its roots in tourism management, offers little in the way of true volunteer programming. Volunteer management reflects the

processes of tourism incentives and not the development of trained and responsible volunteers. To increase effectiveness, programming should include a push for greater and more structured management and the incorporation of more genuine and authentic interactions with locals (Raymond & Hall, 2008). These interactions allow the two parties to make connections, alleviate misconceptions through facts and experience, and generate a sense of mutual purpose and value. Project selection and planning should be local-focused, with culturally relevant individuals serving as equal-partner stakeholders in the process and not merely as part of the tourism experience. Closing the dichotomy between the voluntourist and the voluntoured not only increases the benefit for the community, but also promotes an understanding of local issues on the part of the voluntourist rather than a simple focus on entertainment.

Remedying the process begins with promoting research in the volunteer studies field and development in an attempt of creating truly volunteer-based management in host organizations (Sherraden et al., 2008). Foreign volunteers working in new locations require training not only in the specific type of work that will be required in their positions, but also in sociocultural training and international relationships. The rhetoric of the program as an opportunity to “change the world” (while successfully tapping into the volunteer’s desire to contribute something) should also be investigated and negotiated, as it may further drive the neocolonial issues of the process by encouraging a sense of giver in a lacking environment (Mahrouse, 2011) and overshadow the depth and complexity of world issues. Benefit should be mutual to both the local and the voluntourist, fostering intercultural relationships and promoting reflection on the part of the voluntourist so

that both communities begin to work collaboratively rather than working upon and within.

Some promise for more meaningful and mindful voluntourism experiences has come from the application of service-learning models to the voluntourism experience. In these models, voluntourists provide reflections and engage in discussion and analysis that seeks to highlight the role of the volunteer in the host society and the interpersonal relationships that may arise (Bailey & Fernando, 2011). Dykhuis (2010) further supports the role of reflection and intercultural consciousness but highlights the issue of motive. Voluntourists should first be acquainted with volunteering and welfare-based contexts at home and understand the implications beyond the tourism experience of novelty, because “if students are incapable of recognizing or addressing injustice and inequality at home, there is little value in having them travel internationally to do so, especially if they could potentially cause more harm than good” (p. 22). Promoting the reflection component of the service-learning model in these activities (especially in cases where the host community can participate) has the potential to decrease the gaps present between these groups and ensure an intercultural learning experience on the part of the voluntourist. At this point, the volunteer development practice of evaluation is of increased importance, having the opportunity to measure impact on both sides of the project and increasingly building a bank of best practice for an area of the field with little to no guides or research developed from a volunteer development perspective. This practice not only encourages accountability and research in this area but also promotes actions to close the gap between the fields of volunteer development and tourism management as it applies to this instance of overlapping

interests. Due to the current lack of research in the area from the standpoint of volunteer development, exploratory studies focused on evaluation of such projects can provide insight into areas of further interest and begin building a direction and platform for voluntourism research in the field.

In addition to building these understandings of the human condition at home, Dykhuis also stresses the importance of developing a sense of context. Voluntourists should receive training for cultural consciousness and a deeper than superficial understanding of culture, politics, and history before voyaging abroad, especially in consideration of the exaggerated situations found in nations of the developing world. Kumaran and Pappas' (2012) critical research of voluntourists and voluntourism programming also emphasizes cultural trainings, largely in their call for stronger orientation and training in a volunteer management model rather than in the tourism approach. The voluntourism experience is often lax and typically provides no debriefing once the volunteer returns home. Programming that is rich in opportunities for reflection, true volunteer development and management models, and structured programs both in the host country and home have the capacity to make voluntourism a rewarding experience that increases civic knowledge and engagement and the voluntourist's own personal growth as a member of the world community (Bailey & Fernando, 2011; Bailey & Russell, 2010).

Conclusions

Although the overall humanitarian impact of volunteerism is questionable (Sin, 2010), there are lessons from former successful program practices that can bring this genre of volunteer work more into the realm of volunteer management rather than tourism. Models such as the Peace Corps

program, complete with strong volunteer programming and training components and decreased cost relative to the length of stay and quality of work, may provide insights for better practice and program modeling. Increasing local stakeholder voice in programming may give more voice to the voluntoured and lessen the influence of neocolonialist issues.

The greatest possible influence on changing the tides of voluntourism is to promote research of the topic within the field of volunteer studies, including a focus on volunteer management and the study of interactions cross-culturally. Very little research is currently available regarding the process of voluntourism in the volunteer administration sphere, highlighting a need for study and application from the field of volunteer development. The majority of existing research details the work of individuals seeking volunteer experiences abroad, with few mentions of those completing the project domestically. Some mention is made of corporations and individuals exploring options within national borders, such as the influx of American volunteers to New Orleans post-Katrina (Kaneman & Pappas, 2012), but in-depth studies remain sparse. Exploring the possibility of opportunities within the volunteers' native country may lessen some of the critical issues presented here as well as provide assistance, resources, and valuable cross-cultural understandings of volunteers' own societies and environments before extending this new phenomenon beyond the borders of home. Research focusing on the intercultural elements of volunteering in our own communities may help establish a jumping off point for further research and a development of best practices for the new but quickly expanding field of voluntourism.

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About the Author

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