

Impacts of “Voluntourism” and Future Fair Trade Practices

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## Abstract

“Voluntourism” is the relatively new phenomena characterized by the act of volunteers traveling abroad, often times to a more developing nation, in order to participate in a volunteer program aimed at enacting positive socio-economic or environmental change while also engaging in more traditional tourist activities. A rising occurrence in the literature centered on voluntourism, especially within the United States, is concern with examining the benefits experienced by both the program participants and the indigenous populations in which they serve. However, there are often negative effects regarding typical voluntourism programs that have also been well documented. This article seeks to highlight the controversial nature of voluntourism, and hopes to provide practical suggestions for future Fair Trade Learning practices to help international volunteer administrators become more successful at maximizing the benefits of these worthwhile programs, while also minimizing the potential disadvantages.

*Key Words:* Voluntourism, Volunteer Tourism, Vacation Volunteerism

## Introduction

One topic among the realm of international volunteer management and administration that has received a considerable amount of scrutiny in recent years is the rising trend of volunteer tourism. Initially a tradition held by faith-based organizations in the form of early missionaries, and solidified in the turbulent times of rebuilding following The First World War and yet further by John F. Kennedy with the founding of the Peace Corps, volunteer tourism is growing to be a more and more common occurrence, especially in the past 20 to 30 years (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Brown, 2005; Sherraden, Lough, & McBride, 2008; Devereux, 2008). A phenomenon now known by many experts as simply “voluntourism”, various accepted definitions of voluntourism have circulated since the early 2000s among many disciplines and professions which now utilize volunteer tourists (Brown, 2004; Ong, Lockstone-Binney, & King, 2014; Seymour, Benzian, & Kalenderian, 2012). Some reputable researchers have employed a more specific connotation of voluntourism as the phenomenon has evolved over the years, including Kate Simpson (2004) explaining it as often times “the emergence of third world volunteer-tourism programmes, which seek to combine the hedonism of tourism with the altruism of development work”. However, it is generally defined, and for the purposes of this article will be understood as simply the act of an individual traveling abroad while combining their recreational and leisure interests with their motivation to help others through volunteering, sometimes synonymously known as “alternative tourism” or “volunteer vacationing” (Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, 2014; Brown, 2005; McCall & Iltis, 2014).

Initially the term “voluntourism” itself was regarded with disdain by many volunteer sending organizations (VSOs) as they believed tourism had little to do with their missions (McGehee, 2014). As time progressed, the volunteer tourism industry experienced substantial

growth, leading to the relative acceptance of this terminology. It is estimated that as of 2014, nearly 10 million people had participated in some form of volunteer tourism project worldwide (Voluntourism.org, 2014). Typical forms of voluntourism ventures include community welfare initiatives, such as the construction of a new school, environmental regeneration trips, including various “eco-tourism” activities, and other social/environmental research projects (Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014). In total, sometimes described as “alternative tourism”, voluntourism now contributes an annual estimated \$2 billion to the global economy with over 1.6 million annual volunteers (Weaver, 2006; TRAM, 2008; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). This highlights the sheer impact of the still growing voluntourism industry and its potential for change in the global arena.

Though there has been some debate regarding the diminishing need for foreign voluntourists, as many developing nations now educate many of their own citizens to provide the services in the health, education, and social science fields which were traditionally provided by voluntourists, there is still the potential for great positive impact with such an immense, growing industry (Plewes & Stuart, 2007; McGehee, 2014) However, with as much potential as exists for benefits among volunteer tourism initiatives, there also exists the very real possibility for disadvantageous implications as well. As such, many current researchers, concerned with the mixed and often misunderstood effects of voluntourism and the neglect of VSOs, include a call to action for the development of Fair Trade Learning practices to guide the development of voluntourism programs (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Hartman, 2013; Hartman, Paris, & Blanche-Cohen, 2014).

### Positive Impacts

The benefits of international volunteerism, or “voluntourism”, were among the first facets of this rising trend to be analyzed and reported by both academic scholars and international journalists alike. Most initial studies did much in the way of reflecting on benefits experienced by program participants themselves. While studying the changes in personality traits of voluntourists, Alexander (2012) provides statistical evidence in positive changes in personality including decreases in anxiety, depression, and vulnerability while also cultivating increases in trust, artistic interests, and activity level. These voluntourists participated in paid programs through a company called Aviva in South Africa, engaged in a variety of projects ranging from wildlife and environmental conservation to children and community welfare projects. It has also been well argued that volunteering abroad, especially for university students, promotes the incorporation of “soft skills” into the tourists’ repertoire (Stehlik, 2010). This can include the development of social values and environmental adaptability making the tourist more suitable for university life and future employers.

The focus on the development of the tourist in these studies reflects the personal development aspect of voluntourism, which motivates many individuals to participate in international volunteer programs. Personal development and altruistic motivations are two of the primary reasons individuals decide to commit their time to international volunteer opportunities, in addition to desires for a challenging and meaningful experience (Lough, Xiang, Kang, 2014; Brown, 2004). These researchers also provide evidence that these intrinsic motivations change little when compared across differentiated age groups.

Positive effects experienced by participants engaged in international volunteerism programs include increased levels of cross-cultural understanding, more intimate communication

and understanding of local communities, a positive sense of pride gained from giving back to underserved communities, and more developed professional skills in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world (Brown, 2004; Rieffel & Zalud, 2006; Simpson, 2004). Many studies proclaimed this to be an overwhelmingly beneficial experience for program participants and local communities alike. It seemed rightfully so, considering much of the initial impact evaluations of such programs focused only on the successes of the programs and participants. Unfortunately, these studies would be proven biased in many cases, neglecting to consider perceptions of indigenous populations or other side effects of common volunteer tourist programs. Many of the impact studies simply surveyed program participants to provide evidence of positive impact, who were often times inexperienced, young adults who were, at best, questionable in their ability to assess the effective impact of their program (McCall & Iltis, 2014). For many of these participants, it was their first and only experience volunteering abroad. Once the perspectives of local populations were included in formal research and studies, a slightly different picture of voluntourism began to emerge.

### **Negative Impacts**

Images of starving minorities living in destitute conditions accompanied by idealistic messages of “Save the World” and “Making a Difference” have been slathered across recruitment materials flooding universities and corporate offices in the United States since the 1990s, inviting potential volunteers to enjoy the “other” (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015). People sought out these new, exciting opportunities to genuinely contribute to positive social change while experiencing something exotic in the process. Yet, many of these volunteer tourism programs actually contribute to negative effects experienced by both indigenous populations as well as to the voluntourists themselves. This can include the proliferation of intercultural

misunderstanding, often when participants are left to generalize that their experiences among developing communities represents the whole population (Hall, 2008). Some argue that messages to action included in many voluntourism marketing campaigns, like those mentioned above, can promote the false belief or negative impression, among both participants and local communities in which they serve, that poor countries' development is dependent on the help of outside, Western powers (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015; Devereux, 2008). Even still other disadvantages reported concerning voluntourism programs include the occurrence of false stereotypes of indigenous populations among program participants, lack of consideration of local community needs, disruption or strain of local economies, as well as concerns regarding unequal access to volunteer tourism programs among different demographic subpopulations (McGehee & Andereck, 2009; McBride & Lough, 2010; Guttentag, 2009). While the research on these potential disadvantages are well documented, that does not imply that there is nothing that can be done to minimize or completely avoid these unfortunate scenarios during the development of voluntourism programs.

### **Suggestions for the Future**

In order to explore how best to maximize the benefits and minimize the potential disadvantages associated with voluntourism programs, there are a number of strategies a program can utilize which have been well researched. Offering reasonable suggestions for changes in voluntourism sending programs, many techniques are proven to facilitate cross cultural understanding, and prevent the conceptualization of developing communities as "other" by potential voluntourists (Mdee & Emmott, 2008; Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014). These notable researchers advise that international volunteer tourism sending agencies should adopt the primary program goals of social impact and cross cultural understanding in order to

start on the right footing when developing a socially responsible, yet fiscally efficient, voluntourism program. Through well-coordinated sending programs, and a focus on longer term relationships with host communities over short-term isolated excursions, more positive impacts are often realized (Mdee & Emmott, 2008). Requisite volunteer cross-cultural, pre-departure training is another highly favored technique which can be disseminated in either short format, or in a more long-term class depending on program needs, in order to provide a basis of cultural knowledge and awareness as well as to instill the focus of cross-cultural understanding as the programs mission (McCall & Iltis, 2014). Partnerships are forged with these local communities, and funding begins to become increasingly transferred into the hands of local institutions, rather than back to the host nations' industries which is often the case (Mdee & Emmott, 2008; Guttentag, 2009).

### **Fair Trade Standards**

Some have extended practices known as Fair Trade Practices into the realm of tourism. Known as a set of ethical standard or guidelines for conducting business and programs, Fair Trade Practices have their roots in agricultural industry ensuring socially responsible production of food goods, but have not been considered for reinvention into consideration during the development of voluntourism programs (Mdee & Emmott, 2008; Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014). Developed over the course of two years with collaborative input from various sources of volunteer sending organizations (VSOs) such as international education practitioners, researchers, nongovernmental organizations, and also community members, eight Core Principles have been developed by the Building a Better World Forum for Global Service-Learning in 2013 to guide voluntourism programs from their inception to program completion:



- 1. Dual Purposes.* Programs are organized with community and student outcomes in mind. Incorporating community development with student learning requires that local communities' outcomes are just as valued as student or participant learning.
- 2. Community Voice and Direction.* Drawing on best practices in community development, service-learning, and public health, community-based efforts must be community driven. Each and every step of program design and implementation should include significant community direction, feedback, and opportunities for formative improvements. Actively seeking out the needs and perspectives of the often-marginalized local communities should be a systematic process to gather the views of multiple stakeholders regarding direction and goals.
- 3. Commitment and Sustainability.* International education programming should only be undertaken within a robust understanding of how the programming relates to the continuous learning of the student and community-defined goals of the host community. Volontourism programming should encourage the personal development of participants as well as support continuous communication with the local community partner. For local community partners, this means using the utmost clarity regarding the nature of the commitment with the volunteer sending organization, in addition to the likely development in the future.
- 4. Transparency.* Students and community partners should be aware of how program funds are spent and why. Transparency should extend throughout relationships between Volunteer Resource Managers and their volunteers, as well as between sending organizations and local community partners.

5. *Environmental Sustainability and Footprint Reduction.* Program administrators should dialogue with community partners about environmental impacts of the program and the balance of those impacts with program benefits. Volunteer Program Administrators should take care to analyze and perform impact mediation, which might include practices such as supporting local environmental initiatives.

6. *Economic Sustainability.* Program costs and contributions should be aligned with local economies or social dynamics within the community. Projects should reflect a strong commitment to sustainability, and take steps to manage program funding effectively and in a socially responsible manner.

7. *Deliberate Diversity, Intercultural Contact, and Reflection.* The processes that enhance intercultural learning and acceptance involve deliberate intercultural contact and structured reflective processes by trusted mentors. This is true whether groups are multi-ethnic and situated domestically, comprised of international participants, only students, or community members and students. This reflects the goal to have all international volunteer sending organizations adopt cross-cultural understanding as their primary goal.

8. *Global Community Building.* The program should point toward better future possibilities for students and community members. Among local community partners, the program should promote cultural understanding, as well as ensure continuous contact and commitment regarding program development and goals. For program participants, Volunteer Resource Managers should utilize reflective opportunities and strategies in order to enable individuals to grow in their understandings of themselves as individuals capable of responsible global citizenship (as cited in Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014).

## Discussion

In practice, the implementation of these core concepts would be a most challenging endeavor. All voluntourism programs are different, and each VSO has its own mission, as do the various communities in which they serve around the world. Many scholars argue that the commodification of voluntourism by private enterprises, resulting in dramatized depictions of foreign cultures aimed at “selling” international service experiences to the most heads possible, even further constrains the ability of VSOs to adhere to these principles and instill positive, realistic expectations in their prospective volunteers (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014; Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014). However, this does not mean that certain specific, relatively attainable standards cannot be or should not be adopted when feasible. The Core Principles mentioned in this paper developed by the Building a Better World Forum are not an all or nothing approach. While certainly intended to be a complete system of standards, they were formulated in the hopes of serving as aspirational guidelines for volunteer program administrators, and were not meant to limit initial progress by discouraging small steps of progress.

Although many of the suggestions presented in the literature are seemingly common-sense practices, it should be acknowledged that many volunteer sending agencies or organizations operate with severely limited funding, and the limitations are vast when implementing such changes in training programs for program participants (Mdee & Emmott, 2008). Each VSO will have to consider the principles which most apply to the program in question, and follow through with implementing the ones which are most compatible with the VSOs budget, organization, program goals, and any other constraining factors.

For example, one common type of relatively short term voluntourism program pertaining to community welfare might consist of the construction of a new local well or school. A thorough needs assessment incorporating a bottom-up approach, with the inclusion of local businesses, organizations, and individuals in the project-planning process from the design phase through final evaluations, would ensure the implementation of the first core principle (Seymour, Benzian, & Kalenderian, 2013; Hartman, Paris, & Blanche-Cohen, 2014). While transparency, the third core principle, can be guaranteed by an organized system of project information communication provided with clarity to all relevant stakeholders associated with the project, including members of the target community to ensure compatibility in meeting their needs as well as yours (Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014). Core principles six and eight can be adhered to by carefully crafted, pre-departure training classes which should be required for voluntourists by all forms of VSOs, and a dedicated shift to longer-term projects or initiatives intended for sustainable relationship building with international communities. Pre-trip classes including lectures, small-group activities, and personal reflection with an emphasis on the avoidance of potential negative outcomes have been proven to increase realistic cultural awareness and to firmly establish organizational goals and expectations, especially when conducted in coordination with individuals who possess expertise of intercultural awareness or have prior experience participating in voluntourism programs (Seymour, Benzian, & Kalenderian, 2013; McCall & Iltis, 2014). A shift to international projects being stretched over a longer period of time has been shown to increase target communities' trust in the VSO and its volunteers, as well as fosters more effective and sustainable relationships with the business and economic situation of the community in question (McCall & Iltis, 2014; Devereux, 2008; Mdee & Emmott, 2008). These are but a few small examples of effective, yet relatively cheap methods

of incorporating these core principles into a sample voluntourism program frequently implemented by universities and faith-based organizations across the country, and indeed, the world.

### **Implications for Future Research**

In addition to guiding the development of future voluntourism programs designed by various VSOs, these Fair Trade Learning principles are also intended to further the establishment of a conceptual framework for future research and evaluation. Future consideration also includes the hope that we might conceive of a formalized system of Fair Trade Labeling for VSOs to indicate their commitment to a non-exploitative voluntourism program (Mdee & Emmott, 2008). Similar to Fair Trade Labeling or agricultural food products, it would be a mark of quality for international volunteer programs to guarantee the public of their observation of Fair Trade Standards. There also remains a strong need for additional quantitative and qualitative research in order to provide sound statistical evidence for Fair Trade Practices and to accurately report impacts of future voluntourism programs.

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