

The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer tourism is an increasingly popular form of travel that is attracting growing research attention. Nevertheless, existing research has focused primarily on the benefits of volunteer tourism, and many studies have simply involved profiling volunteers or investigating their motivations. However, there are numerous possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism that deserve increased attention from both researchers and project managers: a neglect of locals' desires, a hindering of work progress and completion of unsatisfactory work, a disruption of local economies, a reinforcement of conceptualisations of the 'other' and rationalisations of poverty, and an instigation of cultural changes. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteer tourism has been hailed widely as a promising sector of tourism that can benefit both tourists and host communities (e.g. Wearing, 2001, 2002; Broad, 2003; Brown and Morrison, 2003; Ellis, 2003a; Uriely *et al.*,

2003; Gunderson, 2005; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Clifton and Benson, 2006; Conant, 2007; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008; Lepp, 2008; Wearing *et al.*, 2008). Perhaps it is logical and inevitable that such optimism would be inspired by a growing interest among tourists to devote their vacation time to performing charitable work, and, indeed, the popularity of volunteer tourism may indicate a laudable development within the tourism industry. However, optimism towards volunteer tourism has been complemented by a fairly uncritical approach towards the sector, when in reality it should be critically analysed just like any other form of tourism. Even though volunteer tourists' benevolence may seem refreshing, there appear to be numerous possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism that are receiving little attention.

This paper, which is based on a review and analysis of the relevant tourism literature, will highlight a number of potential negative impacts of volunteer tourism: a neglect of locals' desires, caused by a lack of local involvement; a hindering of work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work, caused by volunteers' lack of skills; a decrease in employment opportunities and a promotion of dependency, caused by the presence of volunteer labour; a reinforcement of conceptualisations of the 'other' and rationalisations of poverty, caused by the intercultural experience; and an instigation of cultural changes, caused by the demonstration effect and the actions of short-term missionaries. By highlighting several specific possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism, this paper questions the somewhat idealistic depiction of the sector that is evident in many existing studies, and thereby aims to inspire future critical research into volunteer tourism. Moreover, the list of possible negative impacts this paper presents is meant to serve as a framework to guide future critical research

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into volunteer tourism and to assist the development and management of new and existing volunteer tourism projects.

Despite the critical stance that this paper takes, it should not be misconstrued as an insinuation that volunteer tourism should be considered 'worse' than other forms of tourism. Rather, it is contended that all forms of tourism exhibit positive and negative characteristics, and should be viewed accordingly. Furthermore, the needs and desires of host communities are varied, so it is naive and counterproductive to assume that one type of tourism will always be better than another. Additionally, the list of volunteer tourism's possible negative impacts should not be interpreted as an unavoidable series of consequences that are produced by every volunteer tourism project. Rather, the impacts are presented as possible consequences that must be recognised and avoided. Finally, this paper does not intend to imply that volunteer tourism is so detrimental that it should be wholly abandoned. Rather, it is simply argued that the volunteer tourism sector may cause various negative impacts, and a greater awareness of these impacts will allow project managers to develop volunteer tourism ventures in a manner that is more beneficial to both host communities and the volunteers.

Volunteer tourism: definitions, trends, and current opportunities

Volunteer tourism is generally recognised as a form of alternative tourism (e.g. Wearing, 2001; Brown, 2005; Callanan and Thomas, 2005; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008; Matthews, 2008), and both Coghlan (2006) and Wearing (2001) agree that some volunteer tourism experiences fall within the realm of ecotourism, but other volunteer tourism experiences are distinct from that categorisation. The most commonly cited definition of volunteer tourism seems to be the one provided by Wearing (2001) in his seminal book on the topic. Wearing defines, 'The generic term "volunteer tourism" applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research

into aspects of society or environment' (p. 1). For the purpose of this paper, any tourist who participates in volunteer work while travelling will be considered a 'volunteer tourist', regardless of whether the volunteer work is the sole purpose of his/her vacation. However, those volunteers performing work lasting longer than one year, such as Peace Corps workers, are not being considered.

Volunteer tourism actually began well before the emergence of terms like 'alternative tourism' and 'ecotourism', as 'the modern phenomenon of travelling overseas as a volunteer' began nearly one century ago (Wearing, 2004, p. 210). During the late twentieth century, both volunteering and international tourism experienced significant growth, thereby setting the stage for an increased interest in volunteer tourism (Callanan and Thomas, 2005). A recent study published by a tourism research firm claims that the most significant growth in the volunteer tourism sector has occurred since 1990, and the study estimates that 1.6 million people participate in volunteer tourism projects every year (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008). Statistics regarding volunteer tourism are predictably difficult to estimate (Campbell and Smith, 2006) and should be viewed accordingly, but even if the cited figures are not completely accurate, researchers appear to agree that the popularity of volunteer tourism has increased dramatically in recent years. For instance, Young (2008) states, 'Volunteer tourism is certainly an expanding sector of the tourism industry in many countries in both the developed and developing world' (p. 207), and Raymond and Hall (2008) agree, 'In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of individuals taking part in short-term, organised volunteer tourism programmes' (p. 531).

Volunteer tourism projects exist all over the world and are organised by a wide variety of 'sending organisations' (Raymond and Hall, 2008), which include private companies, NGOs, charities, universities, conservation agencies, religious organisations and governments (Broad, 2003; Ellis, 2003b; Söderman and Snead, 2008). The projects involve many different types of work, with some of the most common project categories being community welfare, environmental conservation and research, education,

construction, business development and health-care (Callanan and Thomas, 2005). Also, projects vary in terms of their duration, although volunteers seem to often participate for less than one month (Ellis, 2003a; Callanan and Thomas, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2007).

Existing trends in volunteer tourism research

The volunteer tourism sector often has been viewed very positively, and one simply must consider the introduction of a *New York Times* article on the subject in order to sympathise with this attitude. The article's introduction focuses on a man who spent one winter vacation lounging on the beach in Puerto Vallarta, then went to Sri Lanka on his next winter vacation in order to assist with clean-up efforts after the 2004 tsunami (Gunderson, 2005). With such uplifting anecdotes, it is natural to view volunteer tourism in a positive light. Furthermore, researchers have identified a range of possible benefits provided by the volunteer tourism sector, such as the work that the volunteers achieve, the revenue that host communities or sending organisations can generate, the environmental conservation that the sector commonly promotes, the personal growth that volunteers may undergo, and the intercultural experience involving volunteers and hosts that can foster a better understanding between cultures (Wearing, 2001; Wearing, 2002; Ellis, 2003a; Galley and Clifton, 2004; Brown, 2005; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Clifton and Benson, 2006; Gray and Campbell, 2007; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008; Lepp, 2008; Wearing *et al.*, 2008).

These possible positive impacts of volunteer tourism are quite exciting and should not be overlooked. However, any possible negative impact similarly should not be overlooked, yet much of the existing literature on volunteer tourism focuses predominately on its positive aspects while giving little attention to its negative aspects. Consequently, the volunteer tourism literature abounds with markedly positive assessments of the sector. For example, Wearing (2001), whose book focuses on the personal growth experienced by volunteer tourists at a project in Costa Rica, claims volunteer tourists 'are seeking a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will

contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and/or economic environments in which they participate' (p. 1); Lepp (2008), who researched how different types of volunteers were impacted by their work at a project in Kenya, claims many volunteers 'developed a new perspective on life at home. They discovered an intrinsic need for meaning and purpose in their lives' (p. 98); Broad and Jenkins (2008), who researched the motivations of volunteer tourists at a project in Thailand, state 'Volunteering on a wildlife conservation holiday is an intense type of experience, during which people can interact with wildlife in a manner that is authentic and meaningful' (p. 72); McIntosh and Zahra (2008), who researched a project in a New Zealand Maori community, introduce their study by stating, 'Importantly for this chapter, volunteer tourism is seen to foster a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between the host and guest' (p. 166); McGehee and Santos (2005), who conducted focus group discussions with past volunteer tourists, state volunteer tourism 'may impact participants' lives by providing a community of individuals with common goals and values, providing fertile ground for both the development of networks and consciousness-raising experiences' (p. 764); and Brown and Morrison (2003), who conducted a survey on travelers' interest in volunteer tourism, claim that volunteer vacations create a potential scenario in which 'every volunteer traveller can be an ambassador of peace' (p. 74).

These exceptionally positive assessments of volunteer tourism that dominate much of the literature are complemented by a repeated research objective to simply profile the volunteers and investigate their motivations for participation. Existing research with such a focus has already been conducted on tourists in Ontario (Halpenny and Caissie, 2003), Thailand (Broad, 2003), Indonesia (Galley and Clifton, 2004), South Africa (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004), Costa Rica (Campbell and Smith, 2006), and Latin America (Söderman and Snead, 2008), among other places. This pattern within the literature was recently recognised by Gray and Campbell (2007), who note, 'Academic interest in volunteer tourism remains scant, focussed primarily on the

identities, behaviours, values, motives and personal development of the volunteers' (p. 464). The interest in conducting such research is understandable, because investigating why tourists would be willing to devote their money and vacations to performing volunteer work is a compelling topic. However, as Gray and Campbell (2007) point out, 'While it is important to understand the volunteers, they represent only one half of the story' (p. 464). Even though a small number of studies have focused on host communities and found that volunteer tourism can be beneficial to them (e.g. Clifton and Benson, 2006; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008), further research is undoubtedly needed in this area. Moreover, the repeated focus on profiling volunteer tourists and their motivations frequently seems to derive from a marketing-type goal of better understanding volunteer tourists so that their desires can be better met. This focus, however, implies a prerequisite acceptance of the actual benefits of volunteer tourism. Such an attitude is epitomised by Brown (2005), who researched American volunteers' motivations and perceived benefits, based on their recollections of past experiences. She states, 'We are identifying a new and unique market segment. . . . Implementing this concept will create authentic cultural experiences unlike any other in the industry. . . . The outcome . . . can potentially generate new market dynamics and promises while enabling every traveller to be an ambassador of peace' (p. 494).

Despite these trends in the volunteer tourism literature, a small number of studies have, in fact, critically analysed volunteer tourism and sometimes even considered its possible negative impacts. For example, McGehee and Andereck (2008) studied how volunteer tourism can create dependency in host communities and how the communities may resent the religious components of some sending organisations; studies by Simpson (2004) and Raymond and Hall (2008) question the personal growth that volunteer tourists supposedly experience and the value of the cross-cultural interaction that occurs; Callanan and Thomas (2005) argue that, in some projects, the volunteers are primarily interested in personal gain and the project benefits are questionable; and Gray and Campbell (2007) studied

the sometimes inconsistent values held by different stakeholders involved with a conservation project in Costa Rica. Moreover, some of the volunteer tourism studies that have embraced a notably positive approach towards the sector have briefly acknowledged its potential risks. For instance, Wearing (2001) recognises volunteer tourism should not be viewed as a 'panacea' (p. 51) and states that if the volunteer tourism sector becomes too commercialised, it could end up endangering associated communities and environments. Nevertheless, an analysis of the relevant literature clearly reveals an overriding acceptance and promotion of volunteer tourism that has widely failed to recognise its possible negative impacts. By identifying and elaborating on a variety of possible negative impacts, this paper will illustrate that volunteer tourism is not a flawless form of tourism, and it requires far more critical analysis in future research.

A neglect of locals' desires

The numerous studies that have researched volunteer tourists' motivations have often found that participants are not simply motivated by altruism, but also largely by personal reasons (Wearing, 2001; Galley and Clifton, 2004; Brown, 2005; Coghlan, 2008; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008; Broad and Jenkins, 2008; Söderman and Snead 2008). For example, Söderman and Snead (2008), who studied the motivations of gap-year volunteer tourists in Latin America, conclude, 'Altruism was often part of the motivation, although usually in combination with benefits for oneself, and thus more in line with "reciprocal altruism"' (p. 124). Similarly, Coghlan (2008), who studied project leaders' estimations of volunteers' motivations, claims, 'Although there may be an element of altruism that motivates volunteer tourists, there exists an equally, if not stronger, element of self-gratification that drives participation in these projects' (p. 189). This phenomenon is also nicely illustrated by a quotation made by a volunteer during Wearing's (2001) research. The volunteer states, 'I think most people would be lying if they didn't say there was some selfishness in why they were going. Because it was really to benefit themselves, not just the environment and community in Santa

Elena, even though it is really important' (p. 70).

Although volunteer tourists are not solely driven by altruism, this situation has not generally been viewed as reason for concern. Wearing (2001) and Söderman and Snead (2008), for example, point out that past research into general volunteerism also reveals that volunteers are typically motivated by some degree of self-interest. More importantly, as long as one assumes that volunteer tourism is beneficial, then the idea that volunteer tourists are motivated by personal factors becomes completely irrelevant. In fact, satisfying the volunteers' motivations becomes desirable because it is a necessary measure for attracting project participants. As Broad and Jenkins (2008) state, 'Understanding volunteers' motivations is vital to the design and operation of successful conservation programmes that rely on volunteers as their primary labour source' (p. 72).

Many volunteer tourism organisations undoubtedly understand this reality, and it has certainly influenced how some projects have been developed. For example, in the volunteer tourism project he studied in Kenya, Lepp (2008) found that the project's managers had reacted to the differing motivations of 'community' and 'wildlife' volunteers by granting one group significantly more freedom and independence than the other. Similarly, in describing Earthwatch, a non-profit organisation that runs trips for research volunteers, Speer (1994) explains that the popularity of a research topic influences whether a project proposal is accepted, and 'Earthwatch has a good handle on what sells — proposals involving coral reefs and tropics are likely winners, as are furry animals and pretty birds' (p. 21).

One could argue that accommodating participants' motivations is logical because it will increase volunteer tourism participation and, therefore, provide greater overall benefits. In other words, even if sea turtles, for example, receive more attention than other animals, this situation is preferable to an alternative in which not even the sea turtles receive assistance. However, a problem emerges once one considers the possibility that when tourists' desires are focused upon, they may be considered before the needs and desires of host communities. Such a situation would seem especially

possible when a volunteer project is organised by a private business that may be primarily interested in earning a profit. In fact, Wearing (2001) recognised several years ago that private businesses could undermine the potential benefits of the volunteer tourism sector, and this point was repeated by Lyons and Wearing (2008a, 2008b) more recently with an acknowledgement that 'evidence of a move towards the commodification of volunteer tourism is already at-hand with large tourism operators competing for a share of this new market' (2008a, p. 153). This observation by Lyons and Wearing is confirmed by a recent study conducted by a tourism research firm that looked at hundreds of worldwide volunteer tourism organisations and determined that the commercial segment is growing rapidly, even though non-profit organisations still constitute a majority (Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008). As the commercial segment of the volunteer tourism sector grows, it is possible that more and more communities supposedly benefitting from volunteer tourism will be neglected. In fact, a recent *Time* article quotes the director of Tourism Concern, an industry watchdog, who already claims, 'The [volunteer tourism] market is geared toward profit rather than the needs of the communities' (Fitzpatrick, 2007). In one farcical yet sad example of this situation, as reported in a *Guardian* article, a group of Ecuadorian villagers returned from work one day to find that volunteer tourists had painted the villagers' houses without any prior consultation. Although this example is somewhat hyperbolic, there are certainly other examples of volunteer tourism projects that devote greater importance to attracting volunteers than benefitting host communities.

Lyons and Wearing (2008b) argue that NGOs are better equipped to avoid the problems associated with commercial enterprises, stating, 'In many ways NGOs demonstrate best practice in alternative tourism, and volunteer tourism specifically' (p. 7). However, the authors are correct to subsequently note that NGOs should not simply be viewed as 'all good' (p. 8) because one should not assume that NGOs will always consult closely with host communities. For example, Scheyvens (2002) criticises the non-profit conservation

organisation Earthwatch, stating, 'While Earthwatch claims to do much of its work in collaboration with host country conservation and educational organisations, there is no mention of local community involvement' (p. 109). She claims that the websites of most conservation organisations involved with volunteer tourism do not typically address the issue of local community support, and Scheyvens states that this omission 'suggests that under the guise of global environmental well-being, organisations can forge ahead with such programmes whether or not they have local involvement' (p. 111).

Some people may assume that communities will naturally favour the conservation of their surrounding environments, but that assumption would not always be correct. This reality was made apparent to Matthews (2008) when she participated in a volunteer tourism sea turtle conservation project in Costa Rica as part of her study on the impact of volunteer tourism experiences on young travellers. During the project Matthews discovered that poaching provided a livelihood for some locals, and turtle products were sold by various market stallholders. As the author explains, 'Not everybody in the surrounding areas viewed our efforts kindly,' and 'the locals we worked alongside (being mostly National Park rangers) were not necessarily representative of the wider community' (p. 113). Proponents of volunteer tourism would likely argue that this situation presented a perfect opportunity for environmental values to be shared with the host community. Also, the existence of local opposition to the project certainly does not indicate that poaching should be promoted or the project should be halted, as environmental concern is certainly commendable. However, environmentalism must also be considered within the context of a host community's needs and wishes. In other words, the lack of widespread local support for this particular project highlights the necessity of a new approach that accommodates local needs, such as by providing poachers with alternate forms of income that ideally would be associated with conservation.

Gray and Campbell (2007) studied a different Costa Rican volunteer tourism sea turtle conservation project, and this one appeared to enjoy greater support from the host community. This support was apparently influenced

by the fact that local accommodation owners earned income by housing the volunteers. Nevertheless, the authors found that significantly different attitudes towards development were voiced by the volunteers and members of the local community. The volunteers and project staff members were primarily interested in limiting development in the town for environmental reasons, with one volunteer claiming, 'I'd like it to stay the way it is, I wouldn't really want any more tourism development,' and a staff member agreeing, 'I wouldn't like to see it more civilized' (p. 476). The local accommodation owners, on the other hand, were more interested in promoting tourism development in a controlled manner that ensured benefits would be enjoyed locally. The authors note that the volunteers' unfulfilled desire for locals to denote value to the sea turtles beyond their economic value challenges Wearing's (2001) notion that volunteer tourism promotes 'genuine exchange' (p. 172), in which host community attitudes are given equal consideration and mutual learning occurs. Rather, the volunteers seemed more focused on promoting their own environmental values than appreciating the desire for development within the local community. This type of hegemonic attitude is aptly criticised by Butcher (2003), who questions 'New Moral Tourists' 'elevation of nature above development' (p. 60), which fails to appreciate the true problems facing developing nations. Although Gray and Campbell (2007) offer no indication that the conservationist attitudes of the volunteers and project staff members had any real impacts, in some situations these attitudes, as espoused by volunteer tourism organisations and their volunteers, may actually impede development that is desired by host populations. This potential injustice is exacerbated by the fact that a large portion of volunteer tourism projects involve volunteers from developed countries working in far less privileged nations (Higgins-Desbiolles and Russell-Mundine, 2008).

A lack of appreciation for a host community's needs can exist in non-environmental contexts as well. For example, volunteers may assume roles as 'experts' in local communities about which they may know very little (Wearing, 2001; Raymond and Hall, 2008). McGehee and Andereck (2008) describe one

such instance, as reported by the director of development for an organisation that coordinated volunteer tourism efforts in several West Virginia counties. In this incident, the director declined an offer from another organisation to freely distribute a truckload of clothing, with the director explaining that she preferred to have the clothing sold inexpensively at a local thrift store in order to 'preserve the dignity of local residents and reduce dependency on outside sources'. Nevertheless, the director found that the other organisation was 'adamant: they wanted to set up a table with the truck and "personally hand the clothing to needy folks"' (p. 18). In other words, volunteer tourists wanted to perform work solely based on their own opinions of what was best for the host community, and dissenting opinions voiced by key members of the host community were deemed insignificant.

A hindering of work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work

One reason the volunteer tourism sector has expanded so rapidly is that many volunteer tourism projects have minimal or non-existent requirements regarding the skill set one needs to participate. As Brown and Morrison (2003) explain, 'The only skill that is required by many of these organizations is the desire to help others' (p. 77). Not surprisingly, however, some authors have questioned the benefits that can be provided by volunteer tourists who potentially do not have useful skills, are not familiar with the local culture, and only stay for a very short period of time (Simpson, 2004; Callanan and Thomas, 2005). Proponents of volunteer tourism counter that many projects are long-term, even if individual volunteers only stay for a short period, and 'every bit helps' (Fitzpatrick, 2007). However, Simpson (2004), who analysed the marketing materials used by gap-year volunteer tourism organisations, found that many organisations do not even claim to provide much benefit in terms of true development. She explains, 'Searching through the websites and promotional material of various companies it is possible to find many allusions, but few direct references to "development". Rather, a language of "making a difference", "doing something worthwhile"

or "contributing to the future of others", predominates' (p. 683).

Moreover, the idea that 'every bit helps' may not always be accurate, because unskilled volunteers actually have the potential to impede work progress. In fact, the president of one volunteer tourism organisation, Global Volunteers, is even quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article claiming that, if one views the volunteers' labour as the sole objective, then 'the cost of having the volunteers might outweigh the benefits' (Carey, 2001). This comment was offered in response to statements made in the same article by the executive director of a project involved with the construction of low-income housing in Texas. The executive director claims volunteers are often burdensome and the program only utilises them as a way to generate awareness. As the director explains, 'If you get somebody who's never gotten their hands dirty, in order for them to be any value to us, we have to stop and teach them. Sometimes when you add it all up, it's a negative. We've thought of telling them to go away' (Carey, 2001). Similarly, in her research on sending organisations, Raymond (2008) was told by the coordinator of a volunteer tourism project in Argentina, 'When we bring an intern without strong Spanish skills, it is unavoidably going to be a burden rather than an asset to the organization' (p. 55). Such circumstances can also even exist when the volunteers are skilled. For instance, an article critical of short-term mission trips published in a Christian magazine describes a Nicaraguan doctor who runs a busy health clinic servicing poor families, but must spend three months each year preparing to host US medical brigades. Even though the doctor feels the brigades accomplish very little, he is reluctant to complain because an organisation associated with the brigades funds his clinic (Van Engen, 2000).

In other situations, volunteer tourists may not only impede work progress, they may actually perform unsatisfactory work. For example, Ellis (2003a) and Foster-Smith and Evans (2003) all express a positive attitude towards the use of volunteer tourists in scientific research, but note scepticism within the scientific community regarding volunteers' ability to gather quality data. Foster-Smith and Evans (2003) studied the reliability of data

gathered by volunteers at a project in Scotland and found that the volunteers performed quite well when working on simple duties, but were unable to adequately perform one of the more complicated tasks. These results did not change Foster-Smith and Evans' overall positive attitude towards the use of volunteers, but the risk of poor data impacting scientific research should remain a serious concern that cannot be overlooked. Also, in non-research settings, the implications of unsatisfactory volunteer work can be just as severe. As Simpson explains in a *Guardian* article, gap-year volunteers 'get a level of experience and decision-making which they would not get at home, but [are] also doing things in other people's hospitals and schools that would be never be allowed at home' (Brown, 2003).

A decreased labour demand and a promotion of dependency

Wearing (2001) states that one primary concern with traditional tourism, which can be addressed by volunteer tourism, is the lack of financial and vocational benefits directed towards host communities (p. 146). Such benefits certainly are possible, as Gray and Campbell (2007) found at the project in Costa Rica where volunteers supported local accommodation owners. Also, in their research on a volunteer tourism project in Indonesia, Clifton and Benson (2006) found that its economic benefits were limited, seasonal and restricted to local elites, but the authors still note that the sector can provide much-needed income opportunities and will likely involve a relatively low multiplier effect. However, just because a community is hosting a volunteer tourism project, one should not assume that the community will inevitably benefit economically. In fact, the presence of volunteer labourers may have the opposite effect and may actually negatively impact labour demand or promote dependency.

Several decades ago, Pearce (1980) established a list of criteria to identify jobs that were appropriate for volunteer workers, and the first requirement mentioned was that the jobs 'do not fall within the domain of paid workers' (p. 448). Although Pearce was discussing jobs for non-tourist volunteers working in the

tourism sector, such as local volunteers at a state park, his principles can easily be applied to the volunteer tourism sector. Unfortunately, because many volunteer tourism projects are based on unskilled labour, volunteer tourists frequently perform jobs that locals could do instead. This situation was highlighted by Van Engen (2000), who states in her critique of short-term mission trips, 'Short-term mission groups almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by people of the country they visit' (p. 21). Similarly, in Ver Beek's (2006) study on short-term mission trips to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch, one promoter of a Honduran agency associated with the trips remarks about the volunteers, 'They gather money to come here to do work, work that we are capable of doing' (p. 483). The problem when volunteer tourists perform work that could be performed by local community members is that volunteer tourists naturally work for free — and actually pay for the opportunity to perform the work — so they may undercut competing local labourers. This issue was recognised as a concern by a representative from one sending organisation who was interviewed by Raymond and Hall (2008). Although that organisation claimed to make deliberate efforts to ensure projects did not undermine local labour markets, it is doubtful that all organisations are so cautious. Moreover, the abundance of volunteer tourism projects involving construction work in developing countries would seem to leave construction workers particularly vulnerable to this possible phenomenon.

The presence of free volunteer labour may also disrupt local economies in a broader sense by promoting a cycle of dependency. Wearing (2001) acknowledged this risk early on, stating that a principal danger with volunteer tourism 'is that volunteers can reiterate the ethos of the 'expert', thus promoting deference in the local community to outside knowledge, therefore contributing to the curtailment of self-sufficiency' (p. 51). This issue was subsequently studied by McGehee and Andereck (2008), who were told about the West Virginian organisation's deliberate efforts to reduce locals' dependency on outsiders, as was discussed previously. The authors also found that a similar organisation in Tijuana had instituted a 'no handouts' rule and other policies

to prevent volunteers from encouraging dependency in the communities where they worked. However, the authors report that volunteers often defied these policies after building relationships with locals. In other words, these examples suggest volunteer tourism projects may need to deliberately oppose the promotion of dependency, and even concentrated efforts to do so may not always be fully successful.

Conceptualisations of the 'other' and poverty rationalisations

Even if the tangible benefits of volunteer tourism are dubious, the sector is often defended for its less definable benefits: the personal growth that volunteers may experience and the intercultural interaction between volunteers and hosts that can lead to greater understanding and compassion for others. For example, Wearing (2001) states, 'The most important development that may occur in the volunteer tourist experience is that of a personal nature, that of a greater awareness of self' (p. 2); McGehee and Santos (2005) argue that volunteer tourism organisations 'provide opportunities to encourage or intensify social movement participation and activism support, either through the establishment of network ties or via various consciousness-raising experiences' (p. 761); and McIntosh and Zahra (2008) claim, 'With volunteer tourism, more intense rather than superficial social interaction can occur; a new narrative between host and guest is created, a narrative that is engaging, genuine, creative and mutually beneficial' (p. 179). Similar attitudes are also promoted from within the volunteer tourism sector. For instance, the founder of a non-profit organisation that helps volunteer tourists find projects is quoted in a *Condé Nast* article stating, 'An important part of what comes out of voluntourism is social capital: It breaks down stereotypes. For the traveler, it can help you retool and rethink your life philosophy, and the local people end up with a different image of foreigners' (Elliot, 2008). Similarly, the director of the Kenyan volunteer tourism project Lepp (2008) researched states, 'The purpose of [volunteer tourism] is to get a lot out of the experience and really to just benefit from it. I mean, it isn't all about seeing

a project completed. A lot of it is about that meeting of minds which occurs when people come together and share an experience' (p. 95). It is instinctive to sympathise with these attitudes, as one is naturally inclined to believe that a volunteer working with a host community will have a more 'meaningful' interaction with locals than a tourist in an all-inclusive resort, for example. Such meaningful and beneficial experiences certainly sometimes occur, but one should not assume that volunteer tourism will always involve such positive results (Raymond and Hall, 2008).

The studies that have applauded the intangible benefits of volunteer tourism have primarily relied on statements about personal growth or intercultural understanding made by volunteers (e.g. Wearing, 2001; Brown, 2005; McGehee and Santos, 2005; Lepp, 2008). However, such comments may be influenced by bias, as some volunteers may make statements that they believe are desirable or rationalise the cost of a trip. For example, Ver Beek (2006) found that over half of his study's respondents claimed to have increased their donations towards the agency that had organised their mission trip, but when Ver Beek checked donation records, he found that 75% of the participants had not sent any direct donations to the agency in the two years following the trip, and overall donations, made either directly or via church offerings, increased by only a small percentage. Ver Beek's study, therefore, also raises a second question, which is whether attitudes felt and expressed by volunteers during their trips are enduring, as is suggested by Brown (2005) and McGehee and Santos (2005). The possibility that such attitudes are not always lasting was voiced by a project staff member surveyed by Coghlan (2008), as the staff member states, 'The [volunteers'] commitment is hard to gauge, as many were committed while on site but have shown little long-term interest since returning home' (p. 187). Additionally, even if volunteers' comments reflect their genuine feelings, it should not be assumed that changes in a volunteer's attitude towards an individual are complemented by changes in the volunteer's attitude towards that individual's nation or culture. For instance, Raymond and Hall (2008), who researched the role of sending organisations

in promoting cross-cultural understanding, found, 'Several interviewees implied that the positive relationships they had developed with individuals from different countries were simply "exceptions to the rule"' (p. 536).

Not only are the personal and intercultural benefits of volunteer tourism possibly overstated, but in some instances, volunteer tourism participation may have the opposite of its desired impact and actually reinforce stereotypes. This possibility was suggested by Simpson (2004), who points out that in her interviews with gap-year volunteers, some volunteers 'are emphasizing difference and establishing a dichotomy of "them and us"' as opposed to 'finding commonality between the developed and developing world' (p. 688). More recently, Raymond and Hall (2008) have supported Simpson's claims based on their own research, which also indicated that some volunteers' stereotypes were reinforced instead of reduced.

In fact, based on her analysis of marketing materials used by gap-year volunteer tourism organisations, Simpson (2004) claims that many of the organisations actually promote simplified imagery of destinations and local cultures in order to appeal to potential volunteers' imaginations. Simpson explains, 'The dominant representations of destination countries offered by much of the gap year industry are based on simple dualisms and essentialised concepts of "other"' (p. 682). As examples of this imagery, Simpson cites quotations describing how Brazilians exhibit 'energy and joy', Paraguayans 'are unfailingly charming' and welcoming, and Bolivians are 'generally shy and gracious' (pp. 682–683). Even though none of these particular descriptions is overtly negative, they are questionable and clearly over-generalising. Furthermore, Simpson points out that the volunteer tourism organisations often focus on the 'need' within host communities, as this need is essential if a project is to be worthwhile. Such a focus is epitomised in a quote from the volunteering page of one gap-year website, which was cited by Simpson (2004, p. 686) but has changed slightly since her paper was published. The quotation now states, 'You could find yourself working with people living in unbelievable poverty, disease,

hunger and you will come away with an amazing sense of achievement and hopefully pride in what you have done' (Gap-year.com, 2008). As Simpson notes, such descriptions highlight the 'otherness' of host communities by simply defining them by their needs.

Because volunteer projects frequently involve participants from developed nations working in developing nations (Higgins-Desbiolles and Russell-Mundine, 2008), it is true that volunteers will sometimes observe levels of poverty with which they are unfamiliar. Studies by Lepp (2008), Simpson (2004), Raymond and Hall (2008), and Ver Beek (2006) all found that volunteers commonly remark on how happy locals appear despite their lack of material wealth. Achieving a greater awareness of poverty in the developing world can certainly be valuable, and Lepp (2008) claims that 'confronting global inequality and witnessing the resiliency of Kenyans in the face of it enabled volunteers to put their own problems in perspective' (p. 94). However, Simpson (2004), Raymond and Hall (2008) and Ver Beek (2006) all voice concern that volunteers' 'poor-but-happy' (Simpson, 2004, p. 688) remarks may indicate a rationalisation of poverty as a struggle that locals accept. For example, when discussing the Peruvians she has worked with, one volunteer interviewed by Simpson (2004) remarks (albeit apparently mistakenly with regard to the lack of televisions), 'Here they don't have TVs but it doesn't bother them because they don't expect one, I think they are a lot more grateful for what they get' (p. 688). Similarly, Raymond and Hall (2008) were told by one volunteer to South Africa, 'They don't know any better and they haven't had what we have so to them that's quite normal and they're quite happy being like that' (p. 538). Simpson (2004) argues, 'This ["poor-but-happy" attitude] in turn allows material inequality to be excused, and even justified, on the bases [sic] that "it doesn't bother them"' (p. 688). In fact, Simpson even discovered that some volunteers came to romanticise ideas of poverty and associate it with social and emotional wealth.

Simpson (2004) also found that many volunteers reacted to the poverty they observed by acknowledging their own luck in having been born into more favourable conditions. This recognition is certainly accurate, and Raymond

and Hall (2008) point out that it may represent a valuable lesson for some volunteers. Nevertheless, Simpson (2004) notes that the volunteers' focus on their own situation, rather than that of others, is concerning. Additionally, she states that a focus on luck eliminates genuine 'discussions on inequality and oppression', meaning 'social responsibility then is allowed to languish in favour of an optimistic belief in the justice of fate' (p. 689).

Cultural change: the demonstration effect and short-term mission trips

Because many volunteer tourism destinations are quite poor, one stated benefit of volunteer tourism is that it directs tourism money to destinations that would not normally profit from tourism (Galley and Clifton, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2007). A second stated benefit is that volunteer tourism offers tourists 'direct contact' with locals (Wearing, 2001, p. 42), which is perceived as more meaningful and beneficial than typical tourist–host interactions (Broad, 2003; Brown, 2005; McIntosh and Zahra, 2008). However, these two characteristics of volunteer tourism must also be perceived as risks. These risks were highlighted by Butler (1990) nearly two decades ago in his critique of alternative tourism, in which he notes that alternative forms of tourism may affect relatively large amounts of change because they potentially 'penetrate further into the personal space of residents' (p. 41). In other words, the contact between volunteer tourists and a host community, which in some cases may be poor and have little previous experience with tourists, may in fact function to negatively impact the host culture.

The 'demonstration effect' is a term denoting the process by which a host culture is impacted when tourists draw attention to their lifestyles and items of wealth (Wall and Mathieson, 2006, p. 236). Obviously, host communities may often be exposed to foreign influences independently of tourism, for example, via the media (McElroy and De Albuquerque, 1986), and preventing local communities from interacting with foreigners would be quite patronising and unjust (Butcher, 2003). The demonstration effect also can sometimes inspire positive change (Wall and Mathieson,

2006), but Wall and Mathieson (2006) note, 'More commonly, it is detrimental and most authors indicate concern for the effects of foreign domination of the industry and the impacts of tourists who parade symbols of their affluence to interested host communities' (p. 236). Locals may respond to the presence of wealthy tourists by trying to imitate the tourists' consumption patterns, and discontent can emerge when these items of wealth are beyond the reach of a host community (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Because volunteer tourism projects frequently involve volunteers from wealthy nations working with communities that are — by definition in some cases — quite poor, the demonstration effect is clearly a possible consequence. As Simpson (2004) points out, 'Western volunteer-tourists can... be seen as 'modelling' a way of living, a lifestyle of cultural and material values' (p. 685). Moreover, Wall and Mathieson (2006) state that young people are supposedly especially vulnerable to the demonstration effect, which is noteworthy because many volunteer tourism projects involve work with children. The potential impact that volunteer tourists may have on children via the demonstration effect was specifically recognised by Clifton and Benson (2006) in their study on an environmental research project in fairly remote areas of Indonesia. The authors state, 'Casual displays of wealth by visitors in more remote areas experiencing low levels of income which are the focus of research ecotourism can accentuate cultural as well as economic differences between visitor and resident, leading to jealousy or aspirations particularly in younger members of the resident community which may be impossible to achieve' (p. 242). Fortunately, Clifton and Benson found that locals they interviewed did not generally see the volunteers as threatening traditional norms and values. Nevertheless, the demonstration effect is certainly a danger that volunteer tourism poses, and it is a phenomenon that projects will have to consider in order to avoid eroding local cultures or creating tension with host communities.

Although the demonstration effect involves tourists causing unintended cultural change, with short-term mission trips, cultural change

may be wholly desired and serve as a primary objective of a project. Some people may question the classification of short-term mission trips as a type of volunteer tourism, but individuals who participate in short-term mission trips that do not simply involve evangelising certainly fall within Wearing's (2001) frequently cited definition for volunteer tourists: they are tourists who go on vacations that include an element of volunteer work (Van Engen, 2000; Ver Beek, 2006). In fact, McGehee and Andereck (2008) even point out that volunteer tourism has its roots in early mission and relief work, and the authors state, 'The role of organized religion in volunteer tourism often seems to be the "elephant in the living room" that no one wishes to discuss' (p. 20).

Different short-term mission trips obviously place different levels of importance on the religious elements of their trips. Nevertheless, these trips often have an implicit or even explicit goal of imparting certain religious beliefs on the host community (Van Engen, 2000; Ver Beek, 2006). For example, Ver Beek (2006), whose research appears in a journal devoted to mission studies, claims, 'Proponents [of these trips] argue that North American participants change the lives of those they serve by providing needed goods and services and sharing the gospel' (p. 478). Also, Van Engen (2000) states that evangelism 'is a main goal of many groups' (p. 21). Ver Beek (2006) appears to support the religious elements of short-term mission trips, and one revealing variable he measures in his Honduran study is whether the trip participants had a 'spiritual impact' on the project beneficiaries, with the author hypothesising that this impact would occur because the participants were 'sharing their love of God in both actions and words' (p. 480). Such a desired impact inherently prevents this form of volunteer tourism from truly valuing a host community's culture or allowing a 'genuine exchange' (Wearing, 2001, p. 172) between volunteers and hosts. Quite the opposite, the motive demonstrates a deliberate attempt to impact the culture of host communities, even though this impact may not be desired. For example, McGehee and Andereck (2008) explain, 'During interviews with Tijuana residents, many referred to getting 'the God talk'; e.g. asking 'when are we going to get the

God talk?' as if this is an expected price that they will pay in exchange for the volunteer work' (p. 21). Likely resulting from this dissatisfaction, the authors also found that locals ranked 'faith-based organisations' as the least preferred type of volunteer group when asked to rank their preferences towards different types of volunteers.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a variety of possible negative impacts that can be caused by volunteer tourism. If volunteer tourism is promoted for its potential positive impacts while overlooking its potential negative impacts, the sector risks becoming a 'Trojan Horse' (Butler, 1990) that communities embrace without realising its possible consequences. Fortunately, the negative impacts associated with volunteer tourism are not necessarily inevitable, and can likely be mitigated when projects are properly planned and managed. For instance, McGehee and Andereck (2008) note various local volunteer tourism administrators they interviewed recommended regulating the sector and possibly reducing the quantity of volunteers, while matching volunteers' skills with the needs of the community. Additionally, Raymond and Hall (2008) recommend sending organisations 'should develop programmes which will be of genuine value for the local communities', should approach projects 'as a learning process rather than simply an "experience"', and 'opportunities for interaction with other cultures should be deliberately facilitated' (p. 541). Nevertheless, just like volunteer tourism may be an advisable option for some communities while not for others, any detailed recommendations for improving the sector may be better suited for some communities than others. For example, some communities may have little desire to reduce the number of visiting volunteers while other communities may have little desire to spend their time interacting with volunteers. Therefore, no single formula can be used to develop beneficial volunteer tourism projects, but rather a greater awareness of the sector's possible negative impacts is necessary so that projects can be independently developed and managed in a way that avoids these impacts.

So far, research has focused primarily on the benefits of volunteer tourism and the profiles and motivations of the volunteers. The benefits of this sector are important to recognise, but this paper has demonstrated that volunteer tourism projects can also cause a variety of possible negative impacts, so volunteer tourism requires no less critical evaluation than other forms of tourism. The possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism require far more research attention than they have currently received, and the list of impacts outlined in this paper can provide a guide for future research into this area of inquiry. Only with an improved understanding and awareness of volunteer tourism's potential negative impacts can projects be planned and managed to avoid such consequences. As a result, volunteer tourism could then become more genuinely beneficial to both the host communities and the volunteers, thereby allowing it to truly deserve the acclaim it already often receives.

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