

OPINION

Readers' Response

Volunteer Tourism has Gone Commercial: The Reasons and the Implications

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In the article 'Towards an Understanding of the Drivers of Commercialization in the Volunteer Tourism Sector,' published in *Tourism Recreation Research* Vol. 37(2), 2012, Coghlan and Noakes provide valuable perspective on the increasing commercialization of volunteer tourism (VT). This trend has been observed primarily with disapproval, but Coghlan and Noakes draw upon the broader universe of non-profit research to show that there are some valid reasons why non-profit VT organizations are commercializing. The paper therefore offers a noteworthy contribution to the subject, yet it is nonetheless worthwhile to reconsider and expand upon some of the key topics discussed.

It is easy to lose sight of the unglamorous fundraising side of non-profits, so Coghlan and Noakes' first three drivers (VT organizations address complex issues, operate within a competitive sector, and manage multiple stakeholders) offer a useful reminder that non-profits require money to operate and this money is not always easily available. The three drivers are certainly valid for some organizations, but it should be emphasized that this applicability is limited. For example, claiming VT organizations address complex issues somewhat exaggerates many organizations' efforts by alluding to broader issues (e.g., education) instead of the simpler, less financially demanding goals generally espoused by VT projects (e.g., teaching English in a school). Likewise, the authors themselves acknowledge that as VT organizations commercialize they acquire a particularly complicated stakeholder group (i.e., volunteer tourists), which may even increase stakeholder management challenges. Furthermore, Coghlan and Noakes' list of money-related drivers appears rather incomplete; possible additions could include the fickleness of alternative funding sources (e.g., individual donations, corporate gifts, government grants, etc.) and the potential to boost fundraising via exposure through VT.

Coghlan and Noakes also overlook a critical prerequisite of VT commercialization, which is an ample supply of paying volunteer tourists. This supply has only appeared recently, partly resulting from the emergence of

ethical consumerism and 'life politics,' in which even leisure has become a politicized sphere within which to affect change (Butcher and Smith 2010). Perhaps the authors ignore this phenomenon because the newfound supply of volunteer tourists is technically a 'driver' only inasmuch as it may be alluring to VT organizations. Nevertheless, this allure should not be discounted, as VT can be an excellent funding mechanism (Brightsmith et al. 2008), so it is frankly little wonder that non-profits are opening their doors to tourists looking to pay significant sums of money to perform volunteer labor.

Once non-profits turn to VT for revenue, they then will be influenced by the authors' final two drivers (VT organizations draw their market from materialistic cultures and operate within a broader commercial tourism system). However, this influence really derives from a single driver – when a non-profit accepts paying volunteer tourists, the non-profit becomes a tourism provider that must respond to the demands of its (volunteer tourist) clientele. Myriad VT motivation studies have firmly established that volunteer tourists' demand for personal returns ranks above altruism, and this inclination is further demonstrated by the simple fact that the individuals paid to become volunteer tourists rather than just donating their money. Consequently, the need to satisfy the volunteer tourists' demands leaves organizations vulnerable to being progressively transformed into more traditional tourism providers (Zavitz and Butz 2011). Coghlan and Noakes mention this issue, but unnecessarily obfuscate it by describing it only within the context of their two tourism-related drivers. For example, the authors focus on Generation Y volunteers' values and organizations' partnerships with for-profit intermediaries, but even older volunteer tourists will demand personal returns and even organizations that source paying volunteers directly will, by definition, be acting within the greater commercial tourism system.

Coghlan and Noakes propose that their drivers can serve as predictors for where VT organizations will fall along

a philanthropic–commercial continuum, which would have undeniable value given the lack of financial transparency in the sector (Tomazos and Cooper 2012). However, while the authors' drivers may explain why VT organizations commercialize, it is doubtful the drivers could accurately predict where organizations would lie on a philanthropic–commercial continuum, as the drivers do not readily translate into meaningful predictive indicators. For instance, comparing the complexity of different issues (e.g., conservation vs education) is impractical, and essentially all VT organizations draw their volunteers from the same ('materialistic') markets. Additionally, the drivers may have limited impacts, as one can easily imagine a highly commercialized organization with little competition and few stakeholders, and vice versa. There are simply too many other significant variables, such as an organization's financial health and potential VT revenue, an organization's origins as a VT organization or a non-profit that later became involved in the sector, and management's attitudes towards commercialization and VT involvement.

Despite the drivers' inadequacy as predictive measures, they still provide a needed reminder that non-profits require money to function and non-profit commercialization is far from unique to VT. As Coghlan and Noakes note, more money potentially can mean a greater ability to carry out a non-profit's mission. The possibility that commercialization could be beneficial for non-profits counters the prevailing discourse on VT commercialization, and is a theme the authors could have examined in more depth. Just like other non-profits, more money naturally could make VT organizations more effective, either with their VT projects or other activities. Additionally, if one accepts the purported benefits of VT (e.g., personal growth, intercultural understanding, etc.), and commercial intermediaries can enlarge the sector, then commercialization could make VT's benefits more widespread. Moreover, commercial VT projects, which more

closely resemble traditional tourism, may provide a helpful stepping stone for communities looking to establish more substantial commercial tourism enterprises. Finally, it is wrong to assume that non-profits are inherently preferable for host communities, because non-profits may stick to an agenda even if it contrasts with the desires of a host community, such as valuing conservation over meaningful development (Butcher 2007).

Nonetheless, concerns regarding VT's commercialization are also quite valid, and again Coghlan and Noakes could have examined these issues in much greater detail. It is abundantly clear that in VT 'making a difference' has become a commodified experience that is marketed and sold like any other tourism product (Cousins et al. 2009; Tomazos 2010; Sinervo 2011). Without even necessarily realizing it, the host 'beneficiaries' have become the attractions, and access to them is sold by VT non-profits and businesses (Goldsworthy 2012). The demands of these host communities inevitably will be given less priority as VT organizations must cater to the personal demands of their paying customers. Already there is evidence that VT organizations consider destination attractiveness as a key criterion when selecting project locations (Keese 2011), and numerous studies have found the actual work completed by volunteers can be fairly insubstantial (Vodopivec and Jaffe 2011; Barbieri et al. 2012; Coren and Gray 2012). Even more troublingly, potential negative impacts, like the hindering of organizations' work or disruption of local economies (Guttentag 2009), may be ignored as revenue takes precedence. For example, Richter and Norman (2010) argue that VT involving 'AIDS orphans' in sub-Saharan Africa may be detrimental to the children's development because it entails repeated abandonments. Unfortunately, it is easy to imagine this sort of issue, in which tourists' demands supersede locals' interests, becoming increasingly prevalent as the VT sector becomes more and more commercialized.

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