

**VOLUNTEER TOURISM: TOURISM, SERIOUS LEISURE, ALTRUISM OR
SELF ENHANCEMENT?**

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades many sub-forms of tourism have appeared, some genuinely exclusive, many simply existing variations of tourism given new names to achieve recognition or prominence. Equally, many of these sub-forms have been hailed as “the fastest growing form of tourism” or something similar. In most cases reliable statistics do not exist to substantiate such statements, and closer examination often reveals the sub-form has been in existence for many years but not specifically identified as one of over a hundred so-called “forms” of tourism.

What has been termed volunteer tourism (Wearing 2001) is somewhat distinct from most of the new “forms” of tourism. It is generally acknowledged to involve the undertaking of holidays that involve altruistic actions such as participating in providing physical aid for communities and/or assisting in environmental and cultural heritage preservation and restoration. One of the key elements is the unstated assumption of altruism that is involved in participation in such an activity (Smith 1981; MORI 1990). That is, engaging in an activity for the greater good rather than for personal gain (see below for further discussion on altruism) . As volunteer tourism has gained in participation, such an assumption needs to be questioned and evaluated, and the activity itself examined to determine if it is, in fact, even a part of tourism (Stoddart and Rogerson 2004).

STATUS AND ORIGINS

The activity appears to have had its origins in the form of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and US Peace Corps, when non-profit organisations began to organise trips for volunteers to assist communities, generally in the less developed world in construction, education and conservation projects. Many of the early volunteers appear to have been mature individuals, some of whom had retired early and saw an opportunity to “give something back” to less advantaged groups, although there was always a proportion of participants who were young, often straight from school, national service, or university. The expansion of the activity in recent years has seen some significant developments and changes which make an appraisal of the activity both warranted and necessary.

No statistics appear to be kept on this activity as distinct from overall tourism, either by destination countries (volunteering is not an activity normally specified on immigration, visa or entry forms) or by any tourism organisation, but there is little doubt that the

activity has grown significantly. A Google search for “volunteer abroad” yielded over a million “hits”, and a recent (October 2007) search found more than 300 organisations involved in the activity, with over 3000 projects being listed in over 150 countries. Perhaps of most significance is the increasing commercialisation of the activity. From being a relatively informal and low cost alternative to a conventional holiday, volunteer tourism now ranges from its original model, not even involving international travel, to highly expensive participation involving long haul flights to remote locations, with increasingly complex and often costly arrangements. A proportion of the organisations involved in offering projects and arranging participation are clearly involved in such activities on a profit making basis and view volunteer tourism as one more form of tourism to be commercially exploited. This is not necessarily improper or immoral, but certainly represents a significant shift from the initial model where costs were low and profits non-existent and not sought.

MOTIVATIONS

To understand volunteer tourism or “voluntourism” as it has become known in the media, it is necessary to study the motivations of participants in both the demand and supply elements of the activity (Clary et al 1998; Fisher and Akerman 1998). Do volunteers participate for altruistic reasons (Stebbins and Graham 2004)? A review of the literature on altruism suggests that opinions about the topic range widely (Palmer 2003; Okasha 2005) as to whether such a viewpoint is achievable or whether all human actions are conditioned by selfish motivations and survival techniques (Nagel 1970; Monroe 1996; Knox 1998). Does participating in volunteer tourism represent an altruistic act (Rushton and Sorrentino 1981) or is it seen as a form of self-enhancement by being a positive feature on a curriculum vitae for example? Is it really a form of tourism (Pearce 1993), (international travel for pleasure) or is it more a form of Stebbins’ (2006) serious leisure, engaged in by individuals who are driven by more than the desire for simple enjoyment? Related to such questions are the selections of both the project and the location. Are participants engaging in “a busman’s holiday”, e.g. teachers volunteering to teach, engineers volunteering for construction work on projects, and “greens” engaging in environmental conservation projects, or are they searching for a new experience in a strange location? (Oliner and Oliner 1988) Okun 1994) Is the choice of location significant, for example, does a tropical beach location attract more volunteers than a remote cold mountain settlement, implying that a “holiday” element may be an important part of the experience (Wispe 1978; Zimmeck 1998)?

On the part of the suppliers, considerations are somewhat more basic. There are a number of charitable and non-profit organisations which provide the linkage between volunteers and projects at a low cost, and may also provide training and other services. At the other extreme are purely commercial organisations which arrange travel, accommodation, in some cases transfers, medical coverage and other services, but at a considerable added cost to the participant. Motivations therefore range from something which is close to altruism through to pure commercialism (Osborne 1977; Butler and Wilson 1990).

APPROACH

Given the relatively unknown nature of the motivations of participants in volunteer tourism, this has to be viewed as an introductory research study. The study therefore takes a triangulation approach (Burns 2000) to the topic by examining the two basic elements of supply and demand. Motivations of participants were explored by participant observation as a volunteer in a specific project, with unstructured questioning of participants. Motivation of organisations is being undertaken by web based research and interviews of specific operators sampled from those listed on the WWW. Desk analysis was also undertaken of a sample of projects and organisations to determine the pattern of projects, their location, their purpose, their longevity and the cost of participation. Results are currently being analysed.

RESEARCH ISSUES

The unknown nature of aspects of the topic such as overall numbers of participants, their characteristics and behaviour, as well as the number of projects and organisations involved, systematic sampling was not practical. Instead, it was decided to study all participants engaging in one specific overseas (from the UK) project, coordinated by one organisation. This entailed working with children in an orphanage located in Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The children themselves were not involved in the study for ethical reasons and because they were not involved directly in the motivation of participants. (It is recognised that working with children in general may be a specific motivational factor for some of the participants).

In order to attempt to determine true motivational factors (Maslow 1970; McClelland 1985) it was decided to use covert participant observation and informal questioning of the participants (Ellis 2003). One of the researchers and his brother enrolled in the project and spent three weeks working in the orphanage. All fellow participants were engaged in informal discussions aimed at identifying their characteristics and motivations for participating. To preserve anonymity no real names have been used and not all personal details of participants have been listed. There was no debriefing of respondents as time did not allow this. The field researcher kept a "diary" as did many of the other participants and none objected to the mostly one on one discussions. While it is not claimed that all participants were completely honest and complete in their responses, it is unlikely that many were giving self enhancing answers in a discussion or conversation with a fellow participant (Little 1983). This is one area that would benefit from further research in terms of overall methodology (Charmaz 2000). The orphanage staff were also interviewed informally and the actual behaviour of fellow participants recorded to note if this corresponded to what was said in the discussions (Connell and Lowe 1997).

The supply side is being conducted using a random selection of organisations from those listed on the Web as being involved in offering volunteer tourism experiences. These included charitable bodies, commercial tour operators and others in less clearly defined categories. These interviews are in the process of being conducted in person, by email,

telephone and conventional mail. A review is also being made of media coverage of volunteer tourism or “voluntourism” as it has become known in the UK media. At present the nature of the analysis of this material has not been decided but is likely to include some form of content analysis (Blackmore 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

While it is premature to draw more than preliminary conclusions, some points can be made at this stage in the study. Growth in the provision of opportunities is growing considerably, with new organisations and new projects appearing monthly. This growth is widespread throughout the western developed world. Most projects are located in the developed world, but specific areas are more frequently listed than others, and the range of sites does not seem related to need, if one takes annual income or stage of development of the countries involved. While safety and political considerations may affect this pattern (an absence of projects in Iraq and Burma for example), the existence of an attractive environment (climate and scenery) seem to be related to site selection. The commercialisation of volunteering is increasing, as an increasing proportion of organisations are offering opportunities that provide them with a commercial return beyond costs, and thus one may argue that to the supply sector, this activity is clearly seen as a form of conventional tourism. It is much less clear where, on a continuum from altruism to self enhancement, volunteer tourism falls, and it is likely that this varies very greatly from individual to individual. To some it clearly a holiday, to others a commitment with real costs, and to others something in between, an enjoyable experience with anticipated benefits in terms of career advancement at some point in the future. Prestige and self improvement, as well as socialisation are other benefits that can accrue to participants. Volunteer tourism emerges as a genuinely different form of tourism to most segments of the activity, and to learn more about it may require somewhat different approaches to research compared to the study of conventional tourism.

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