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Research Probe

This Department has been specifically created to include findings of special significance and problem areas of subtle nuances in tourism research. Insightful contributions presenting the state-of-the-art, preferably from the developing societies, will be appreciated. It will also encourage scholars and authors to think against the grain, probing the consistency of theoretical notions and research trends whose heuristic value is all too often taken for granted. For details, contact Editor-in-Chief, Tourism Recreation Research, A-965/6 Indira Nagar, Lucknow, India. e-mail: trrworld@gmail.com

Volunteer Tourism: As Good as It Seems?

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Volunteer tourism (VT) has been widely praised as an optimal form of tourism that is beneficial for everyone involved. In VT, tourists supposedly are no longer uncaring hedonists, but rather compassionate ambassadors of goodwill, and host communities supposedly are no longer objects of exploitation and commodification, but rather respected equals and grateful recipients of needed assistance. In other words, VT has been positioned as the antithesis of mass tourism and all of the problems frequently associated with it. As Brown (2005) stated, 'The volunteer vacation purports an infusion of an ideological divergence from the market-driven priorities of mass tourism' (p. 493). Although alternative tourism has been assailed by numerous critiques (e.g., Cohen 1989; Butler 1990; Wheeller 2003), the subsector of VT has remained mostly unblemished, maintaining its image as tourism at its very best—tourism that encompasses such buzzword ideals as sustainability, empowerment, local development, community participation, environmental conservation, and cross-cultural exchange.

Numerous studies have identified and described various benefits that can be derived from VT (e.g., Crabtree 1998; Wearing 2001; Broad 2003; Brown and Morrison 2003; Ellis 2003; Singh and Singh 2004; Brown 2005; Jones 2005; McGehee and Santos 2005; Clifton and Benson 2006; Zahra and McIntosh 2007; Lepp 2008; McIntosh and Zahra 2008; Ruhanen et al. 2008; Wearing et al. 2008), but these benefits often have been accepted unquestioningly, with VT receiving meagre critical assessment. The apparent benefits of VT certainly should not be disregarded, but it is vital to recognize that such benefits are potential – not inevitable – consequences of VT. In fact, there is reason to believe that such benefits may be far less common than much of the VT research suggests. Furthermore, VT even has the potential to produce negative impacts on the individuals and communities involved (Guttentag 2009). The predominant focus on VT's benefits in existing research has, therefore, resulted in a troublingly incomplete image of VT that may be used to encourage it in host communities. A more complete and accurate image of VT can be provided through a critical analysis of the benefits that VT purportedly offers: the work that the volunteers achieve, the personal changes that the volunteers experience, and the cross-cultural exchange that occurs among the volunteers and the hosts.

The Work that the Volunteers Achieve

The work that the volunteers accomplish represents a seemingly intrinsic benefit of VT. Because VT often involves volunteers from developed countries working in underdeveloped countries (Higgins-Desbiolles and Russell-Mundine 2008: 187; Sin 2009: 495-496), VT projects seem to offer a wonderful form of charity for underprivileged communities. Nevertheless, for a form of tourism alleged to be particularly sustainable, the long-term impacts and potential unintended consequences of VT projects have received scant attention.

For example, VT projects may foment dependency, as host communities learn to rely on external sources of assistance, meaning immediate gains can end up subverting a community's capacity to develop sustainably. Dependency also renders host communities extremely vulnerable because VT projects may be discontinued at any time. McGehee and Andereck (2008) found dependency was a major concern for local organizations that the authors researched in West Virginia and Tijuana, and the organizations experienced varying levels of success convincing volunteer tourists not to give free handouts.

The work that the volunteers perform also may reduce local job opportunities. By definition, volunteers provide labour freely, so naturally they may undermine locals competing to offer those same labour services. This essential phenomenon has been observed on a larger scale in Africa

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where food aid (Dugger 2007) and donated clothing (Matheson 2000) have sometimes destroyed local markets for those same products, thereby impairing development. Although huge aid shipments clearly differ from the work achieved in VT projects, the similarities are close enough that it would be unwise for the VT sector to ignore such lessons and risk repeating the same mistakes. It is undoubtedly possible, for instance, that local English teachers, construction labourers, or other workers could encounter a decreased demand for their services in the face of a steady supply of volunteers eager to perform the same jobs for free.

Furthermore, volunteers may be incapable of performing their jobs adequately. Many projects have no prerequisite skills (Brown and Morrison 2003: 77) and it is incorrect to assume that volunteers possess some innate ability to perform jobs like teaching English or constructing houses. This issue is further exacerbated because volunteers may remain for only a brief duration, may be unable to communicate in the local language, and may be unfamiliar with the local culture. As the coordinator of a VT project in Argentina explained, 'When we bring an intern without strong Spanish skills, it is unavoidably going to be a burden rather than an asset to the organization' (Raymond 2008: 55).

Such potential issues with VT projects are not inevitable, yet the issues should not be dismissed as merely improbable outcomes associated with poorly planned projects that exhibit obvious deficiencies. For example, even when tourists perform volunteer medical work, which many would see as having unassailable merit, it should not be viewed as inherently beneficial. This work may provide short-term benefits, but the efforts may also engender dependency on outside personnel and resources, undermine confidence in local healthcare providers, and compete directly with such local providers (Montgomery 1993; Bishop and Litch 2000; DeCamp 2007; Bradke 2009). Moreover, the quality of care that these volunteers provide has been criticized for a variety of reasons: the volunteers often possess little knowledge of the local culture and language; the groups sometimes permit individuals without appropriate medical training to dispense basic medical care; the volunteers have no accountability; the volunteers may put their egos above the best interests of the patients, feeling that the normal standards of care do not apply; the volunteers cannot provide the long-term care that is sometimes necessary (e.g., after certain surgeries); and the groups often do not associate with local healthcare providers, which increases the chances that inappropriate care will be given either by the volunteers or subsequently by the local providers (Bishop and Litch 2000; Roberts 2006; Wall et al. 2006).

Despite such concerns, projects like those providing free medical care likely will receive strong local support. In fact, the limited research examining the attitudes of host communities has generally found that they view VT fairly positively (e.g., Clifton and Benson 2006; McIntosh and Zahra 2008; McGehee and Andereck 2009). Nevertheless, it is erroneous to assume that VT projects inherently enjoy widespread local support.

Myriad studies have investigated volunteer tourists' motivations (e.g., Wearing 2001; Broad 2003; Galley and Clifton 2004; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Rehberg 2005; Campbell and Smith 2006; Clifton and Benson 2006; Pike and Beames 2007; McIntosh and Zahra 2008; Söderman and Snead 2008), and the studies have repeatedly found that the volunteers are motivated by personal reasons in addition to altruism. These studies generally have accepted this finding without much concern, as volunteers' motivations are irrelevant when evaluating the impacts of the projects. However, such reasoning ignores that volunteers' motivations influence volunteers' preferences, and these preferences influence the selection and design of projects as project operators strive to attract volunteers. As Lorimer (2008) found during interviews with managers of VT conservation projects, 'Managers know from past experience which projects work and sell well, they continuously gauge and channel volunteer enthusiasms and then seek to establish or solicit similar ventures' (p. 9). In this scenario, a host community's needs may be superseded by the desires of the volunteers. Such a situation is worrisome because the volunteers may hold opinions on relevant issues like development and conservation that are inconsistent with the needs and wishes of the host communities. For example, when participating in a Guatemalan VT project, Vrasti (2009) found, 'Never is the rhetoric of "small is beautiful" questioned'. Never does it cross the minds of volunteer tourists that their ideals may be at odds with those of locals' (p. 21).

Even more troublesome, the project operators' goals – as unrelated to the volunteers' motivations – similarly may contrast with host communities' goals. This concern seems particularly germane for conservation projects, and especially those run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which is ironic because NGO VT operators are often perceived as superior to commercial operators (e.g., Lyons and Wearing 2008). However, sometimes NGOs unwaveringly promote conservation against the wishes of local communities (e.g., Kinan and Dalzell 2005; Butcher 2007: 70-71). As Butcher (2007) described when discussing NGOs and ecotourism development, in some cases 'community participation

amounts to participation in a pre-existing agenda, rather than in determining the agenda' (p. 74). This limited community participation was experienced first-hand by Matthews (2008) as she participated in a VT sea turtle conservation project in Costa Rica and found that many locals expressed little support or even resentment towards the project. Such attitudes certainly do not signify that conservation efforts should be abandoned, but the situation clearly refutes the idea that VT projects invariably receive high levels of community participation and support.

The Personal Changes that the Volunteers Experience

Regardless of what volunteer tourists actually accomplish, many researchers have praised VT for providing the volunteers with an opportunity to experience positive personal transformations. As Wearing (2001) stated, '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). The diverse personal changes that volunteers may experience include enhanced personal awareness, increased confidence, greater self-contentment (Wearing 2001), personal growth, a rejection of materialism (Brown 2005), increased interpersonal skills, increased problem-solving skills, increased communication skills (Jones 2005), a broadened perspective on life, a greater sense of social justice and responsibility (Zahra and McIntosh 2007), identity development (Matthews 2008), a discovery of self (Lepp 2008), and a development of self (Wearing et al. 2008). However, it is only sensible to focus on these forms of personal development after the benefits of the volunteer work itself have been established. If the work is somehow detrimental to a host community, then the volunteers' personal transformations become benefits earned at the expense of the host community. In other words, VT ends up producing the exact situation its proponents oppose—tourists exploiting locals for the tourists' own personal gains.

Moreover, the significant personal transformations that volunteers may experience should not be perceived as inevitable. In fact, the very idea that personal traits are flexible enough to be transformed by brief tourist experiences, yet persistent enough to be maintained thereafter is somewhat contradictory (Brookes 2003). Furthermore, personal traits are not necessarily absolute, but rather situational (Brookes 2003). In other words, it is incorrect to assume that personal changes that volunteers experience during a project inevitably will remain once the tourists return to their previous lives. For example, Sin (2009) researched volunteer tourists working in South Africa and found, 'While there was a sense amongst respondents…that they felt a greater consciousness towards particular societal issues, respondents were not necessarily able or willing to commit to further volunteering activities in other contexts' (p. 494).

The Cross-Cultural Exchange

Volunteers' personal transformations may result in part from the cross-cultural exchanges enabled by VT, which are perceived as beneficial to both the volunteers and the hosts. For example, McIntosh and Zahra (2008) stated, '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). VT is perceived as an effective catalyst for such favourable intercultural interaction partly because VT can create an environment in which power is shared equally between tourists and hosts. As Wearing (2001) explained, 'The power balance between tourist and host can be destabilized…and tourists spaces constructed for genuine exchange which will benefit all the selves involved' (p. 172). However, in actuality, an environment in which one privileged group is donating their time and another underprivileged group is receiving assistance is not particularly conducive to producing an equal-power relationship. In fact, this aspect of VT has even led some to posit the activity as a form of neo-colonialism. For instance, one sending organization's director criticized, '[Some] providers reinforce a colonial attitude that development is something that educated people from rich countries do to poor people who know no better. They perpetuate the notion that Africa, Asia and Latin America are playgrounds for young people to experience "real life"' (Brodie 2006).

Additionally, the impacts of the cross-cultural exchange may not always be desirable. For example, volunteers may observe poverty and suffering up close, and it is suggested that this experience can offer the volunteers a better perspective on their own lives and possibly inspire action against global inequalities (e.g., McGehee and Santos 2005; Zahra and McIntosh 2007; Lepp 2008). However, many volunteers actually appear to rationalize or even romanticize their surrounding poverty by focusing on the happiness that the hosts exhibit (e.g., Simpson 2004; Pike and Beames 2007; Raymond and Hall 2008). As one volunteer working in Ghana commented, 'These people lack of lot of things financially, but the riches they've got inside themselves is priceless' (Pike and Beames 2007: 152). Unfortunately, this 'poor-but-happy' mentality can excuse poverty instead of inspiring opposition to it (Simpson 2004).

Cross-cultural exchange also has been lauded as a way to foment greater cultural respect and reduce stereotypes (e.g., Jones 2005; Lepp 2008). This outcome appears logical and it is supported by studies on 'intergroup contact theory,' which generally have found that intergroup contact reduces

prejudices (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Likewise, in tourism it has been found that the closer interactions provided by ecotourism can improve tourists' attitudes toward their hosts (Pizam et al. 2002), even though mass tourism may have the opposite effect (e.g., Milman et al. 1990; Anastasopoulos 1992). However, several VT studies have found that the experience actually may lead volunteers to reinforce their pre-existing cultural stereotypes (e.g., Raymond and Hall 2008; Sin 2009). Such reinforcement may occur if the volunteers witness behaviours confirming pre-existing stereotypes, and even disconfirming observations may be discounted. For instance, Raymond and Hall (2008) found, 'Several [volunteers] implied that the positive relationships they had developed with individuals from different countries were simply "exceptions to the rule"' (p. 536).

Moreover, VT has been posed as conducive for cross-cultural exchange because of the close contact between volunteers and hosts, but this close contact may also produce undesirable cultural changes. For example, changes may occur inadvertently through the 'demonstration effect' as hosts are influenced by affluent foreign tourists exhibiting their own customs and items of wealth (Wall and Mathieson 2006). On the other hand, short-term missionary trips, which are growing in popularity and represent a significant subset of VT, may be specifically intended to invoke changes in the host culture. Degrees of evangelism certainly vary between different groups, but there is little question that many groups see proselytizing as a key feature of their trips (Fanning 2009). Unsurprisingly, many host communities appear to resent being submitted to such proselytizing (e.g. Rohde 2005; McGehee and Andereck 2008).

Research Biases

The purported benefits of VT have received considerable praise and comparatively little scepticism in part because of apparent biases in the VT research. Numerous studies have investigated the motivations of the volunteers or examined the benefits of the projects, but far fewer studies have examined VT from a host perspective or submitted VT to a high level of critical scrutiny. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the research primarily has found reasons to support VT.

Furthermore, much of the VT research has relied on evaluations made by volunteers, yet these evaluations are extremely vulnerable to biases. As Vittersø et al. (2000) explained, tourists' vacation assessments can be influenced by cognitive dissonance because, 'Having used a considerable amount of time and money to visit an attraction, it might for example be difficult for some persons to admit that the visit was a failure' (p. 433). For instance, on a Southeast Asian adventure tour, Bowen (2001) found, 'Tourists sought to justify and re-justify the decision to undertake the tour in question' (p. 55). Applied to VT, and combined with potential social desirability biases, is it really surprising that volunteers being interviewed or surveyed often state that they have experienced positive personal transformations or developed meaningful connections with their hosts?

Although far fewer studies have evaluated VT from the perspective of host communities, such studies also may be influenced by biased evaluations. For instance, Daly (2009) participated in an El Salvadorian project and found that host community leaders involved in the project exhibited positive attitudes towards it, but her own observations and those of a local project facilitator indicated that some significant concerns were being overlooked. Daly offered various possible explanations for such oversights, including that locals may be wary of criticizing a project to foreign researchers who resemble the volunteers, or that hosts who benefit in any way from a project may fear that criticisms could cause the project to be terminated.

Conclusion

The benefits of VT clearly are not inevitable, yet neither is it inevitable that VT will fail to provide benefits. For example, some problems with VT originate with sending organizations, so improvements made by such organizations could produce significant improvements throughout the sector (e.g., Raymond 2008; Raymond and Hall 2008). Moreover, there is no question that VT already has offered many benefits to volunteers and host communities around the globe, and sometimes these benefits trump all other concerns. For instance, it would be extremely unfortunate if needed medical assistance that volunteer tourists could offer were withheld because of outsiders' fears of potential problems like dependency formation. In other words, the issues this paper has raised are not a complete rejection of VT's possible benefits, but rather a caution that these benefits cannot be taken for granted. VT requires no less critical evaluation than any other form of tourism and advocating it as inherently beneficial denies the opportunity for potential issues to be identified and corrected. On the other hand, by recognizing the potential benefits of VT as possibilities and not inevitabilities, these benefits hopefully can be made more common.

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