



VOLUNTEER TOURISM—“INVOLVE ME AND I WILL LEARN”?

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Abstract: Voluntourism or volunteer tourism is increasingly available and popular amongst everyday tourists in different parts of the world. Despite its seeming virtue and it often being positioned as a form of “justice” or “goodwill” tourism, critics in the public media have begun to question and criticize the effectiveness or “real” value of volunteer tourism. However, academic work has not yet critiqued volunteer tourism in the same manner. This paper thus provides a critical and timely review of volunteer tourism, using interviews and participant observation with 11 respondents on a volunteer tourism trip to South Africa. This paper reviews volunteer tourists’ motivations (what prompted their participation); performances of the “self” in volunteer tourism; and the tensions and paradoxes surrounding volunteer tourism. **Keywords:** Voluntourism, volunteer tourism, motivation, performances, Singapore, South Africa. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The pitch is simple. Instead of two weeks sipping wine somewhere comfortable, somewhere scenic, put your money to better use and volunteer your labour to a Third World charity or an aid agency. The idea oozes with virtue. And when something sounds so good, I get bothered. For one thing, I have to wonder what real value volunteer tourists offer their hosts.

The cynic in me suspects that these short-timers take home more from their slumming in the Third World than leave behind for the underprivileged they are supposed to help... There is the cleansing of developed-world middle-class guilt. There might even be the opportunity to use the experience on a college application or job resume (Kwa 2007).

Volunteer tourism (a form of tourism where the tourists volunteer in local communities as part of his or her travel) is becoming increasingly available and popular amongst everyday tourists in different parts of the world. Despite its seeming virtue and it often being positioned

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as a form of “justice” or “goodwill” tourism (see Butcher 2003; Scheyvens 2007; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004), critics in the public media (usually in the form of newspaper commentaries as cited above) have increasingly begun to question the effectiveness or “real” value of volunteer tourism (Bennett 2008; Bowes 2008; Judith Brodie, cited in Griffiths 2007; Kwa 2007; Mahti 2007; Sudderuddin 2007). Between those who applaud volunteer tourism’s presupposed benefits and those who prefer to take a more cynical view towards the phenomena, there is arguably a lack of a middle-ground with substantial research that presents a balanced view of volunteer tourism for what it really is. Most interestingly, there appears to be a dearth of academic pieces that have taken a critical view of volunteer tourism. For the increasing numbers of lay people interested in volunteer tourism and the agencies providing “voluntourism vacations”, there is a critical need for research to provide a firm foundation for a deeper understanding of volunteer tourism—in both its positive and negative aspects. This paper acknowledges this need, and focuses in particular on individual volunteer tourists’ experiences, using fieldwork with a group of volunteer tourists from the student-formed team “Action Africa” from the National University of Singapore.

This paper begins with an exploration of respondents’ motivations for participating in volunteer tourism, followed by a discussion on how particular motivations, perspectives and objectives of volunteer tourism is “performed” on the ground. This research has found that at least within the group of 11 volunteer tourists interviewed, motivations often revolved around the desire to travel or to visit a different or “exotic” destination. Also, while volunteer tourists interviewed did allude to some changes in opinions after their experiences, it was inconclusive as to whether this has led to substantial changes in their value-system, social consciousness, or willingness to volunteer in other arenas after their volunteer tourism experience. This is contrary to earlier findings by other authors that has mostly suggested that volunteer tourism has very direct and tangible positive outcomes amongst volunteer tourists (Broad 2003; Brown and Morrison 2003; Campbell and Smith 2006; Halpenny and Caissie 2003; McGehee and Santos 2004; McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Scheyvens 2002, 2007; Stoddart and Rogerson 2004; Uriely, Reichel and Ron 2003; Wearing 2001, 2003; Zahra and McIntosh 2007). The aim of this paper is thus to uncover the underlying tensions surrounding these motivations and performances and discuss what indeed the aims of volunteer tourism projects are, who determines these aims, and how differing notions are continually performed and negotiated throughout the entire volunteer tourism experience.

SITUATING VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Central to volunteer tourism is the idea that tourism ventures can and should bring about positive impacts to locals in host-destinations. Mass tourism is often criticized for its failure to deliver promised ben-

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