



## Case Study

## The motivations and expectations of international volunteer tourists: A case study of “Chinese Village Traditions”

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## ABSTRACT

International volunteer tourists devote not only financial support but also time and effort to conservation, preservation, or humanitarian projects outside their original countries. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a qualitative study on the motivations of ten international volunteer tourists who joined the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition of the Earthwatch Institute in the summer of 2008. The main research question was, “Why do people join international volunteer tourism trips?” Eleven themes dealing with motivations emerged and were categorized into three groups: personal, interpersonal, and other. Four personal factors were measured: authentic experience, interest in travel, challenge/stimulation, and other interest. Four interpersonal factors were also considered: desire to help, interaction with locals/cultures, encouraged by others, and enhancing relationships. Other factors included unique style of the trip, time/money, and organization goal. The findings of this study echo previous literature reviews in different settings.

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## 1. Introduction

Travel, originally intended for trade and conquest, had shifted over time to focus on pleasure and to serve as a symbol of social status. After WWII, the increase of disposable income, new technology, and greater political freedom led to major growth for mass tourism (Mieczkowski, 1995). Influenced by media promotion, longer holidays, and greater leisure awareness, tourism became one of the fastest growing industries in the world (Holden, 2000). After the 1970s, due to the shrinkage of financial support, many governmental and non-governmental organizations started looking for volunteers who could contribute both financially and physically to field research or reconstruction work (Ellis, 2003a). By the 1980s, environmental concerns began to influence consumption behavior. Although mass tourism was still the mainstream of the market, new tourism styles emerged, including “alternative,” “green,” “sustainable”, and “natural” (Holden, 2000). The push force of alternative tourism and the pull force of the need for volunteering promoted this novel type of tourism. Volunteer tourism has become a significant phenomenon for decades.

This new form of alternative tourism has become increasingly popular under a variety of names: “volunteer tourism” (Henderson, 1981), “volunteer vacation” (McMillion, Cutchins, & Geissinger, 2006), “mini-mission” (Brown & Morrison, 2003), “mission lite,” “pro-poor tourism” (Ashley, Roe, & Goodwin, 2001; Hall, 2007), “vacation volunteering,” “altruistic tourism” (Singh, 2002), “service-based vacation,” “participatory environmental research tourism (PERT)” (Ellis, 2003b), and “voluntourism.” Based on the studies of the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (2008), the volunteer tourism market has grown rapidly, with a current yearly total of 1.6 million volunteer tourists contributing a value between USD 1.7–2.6 billion. The significant growth and the uniqueness of the style have attracted many researchers and practitioners.

This type of excursion includes two elements: tourism and volunteer service. The definition of a visitor is “any person traveling to a place different from that of his/her usual environment for less than twelve months and whose main purpose of travel is another than the exercise of an activity remunerated within the place visited” (UN et al., 2001, p. 13). For the purpose of this study, tourists are visitors who stay in a particular country for at least one night, while visitors are all types of travelers (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). Wearing and Neil (2001, p. 233) explain, “Tourism is a complex experience, often involving subtle interaction among the tourists, the site and the host community.”

Volunteerism is defined as “a specific type of sustained, planned, prosocial behavior that benefits strangers and occurs within an

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organizational setting” (Marta, Guglielmetti, & Maura, 2006, p. 222). Combining the definition of tourism and volunteerism, Wearing (2001) defines volunteer tourists as people who invest their time, budgets, and manpower at a destination far from home to gain cultural, environmental, and spiritual experiences.

From the definitions above, volunteer tourism is clearly a tourism activity incorporating volunteer services that is concerned about environmental, cultural, or humanitarian issues and intends to benefit not only tourists but also locals. It satisfies a need for tourists who want to “travel with a purpose” (Brown & Lehto, 2005) and “make a difference during their holidays” (Coghlan, 2006), enjoying a tourist experience with the benefit of contributing to others. This kind of trip usually provides authentic experiences in places fewer general tourists approach, such as protected natural areas or distant villages.

Volunteer tourism products are new to both the tourism and volunteer markets. Many stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, commercial operators, and even academic institutions, have begun to offer such products and services (Ellis, 2003b). Although the content of their projects may be similar as far as the volunteer and tourism elements, their goals and missions vary widely. For example, some expeditions emphasize the tourism aspect, while others include more volunteer services. Trips may target young people, mature adults, families, unskilled laborers, students, or professionals. The duration of a trip may be less than a week, multiple weeks, months, or even years. Some expeditions require the volunteer tourists to perform extensive labor, such as building houses, and some only take one or two days, perhaps working with orphans. The concept of volunteer tourism includes a great diversity of projects and involvement of volunteer tourists.

Because of the diverse characteristics of participants and the distinct context of the trips, volunteer tourism studies have shown a great breadth of motivations. Wearing (2001) explains that motivations of volunteer tourism include altruism, travel and adventure, personal growth, cultural exchange and learning, professional development, organization goal or mission, and right time or place. The four reasons why people travel with a purpose as defined by Brown and Lehto (2005) are cultural immersion, the desire to give back (altruism), camaraderie (friendship), and family.

The key motives of volunteer tourism in Caissie and Halpenny’s study about a nature conservation program (2003) include pleasure seeking, program “perks,” place and nature-based context, leaving a legacy, and altruism. The researchers found that the participants focused more on self than altruistic reasons and expected their trip not only to fulfill a higher need such as self-actualization but also the basic needs of relaxation and stimulation (Caissie & Halpenny, 2003). Mustonen (2007) claims that altruism, egoism, socializing, and individuality are four interactive dimensions that motivate volunteer tourists.

Callanan and Thomas (2005) suggested classifying volunteer tourism into three groups: “shallow”, “intermediate”, and “deep” as Sylvan (1985)’s idea of ecology which cited in Acott and Trobe’s study (1998, p. 242) Analogue to the concept of “shallow ecology” which means being more concerned about the welfare of humans alone than nature as a whole, “the shallow volunteer tourism” means being more concerned about self-development and career/academic achievement than about the welfare of local community or project itself (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). The level of involvement, contribution, trip duration, skill requirements, and the importance of self-interest motives could be the factors to categorize “shallow, intermediate, and deep” volunteer tourism (Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

For Rehberg’s motivation study (2005) in international volunteer program among young Swiss adults, he sorted 12 motivations

from 118 participants into three categories: “achievement something positive”, “quest for the new”, and “quest for oneself”. The first group of motive focuses more on the ethical values and consideration while the second one focuses on new experience, culture, and friends. The third one focuses more on self-interest reason and mainly on career, professional, or academic field (Rehberg, 2005).

Mustonen (2007) adopted Brown and Lehto’s (2005) thoughts, separating the volunteer tourists into volunteer-minded and vacation-minded, yet true volunteer tourists exist in a continuous dimension somewhere in between.

### 1.1. Tourists’ motivations

Cohen (1972) classifies tourists into four groups, sorted by motivation: the organized mass tourist and the individual mass tourist seek familiarity, while the explorer and the drifter seek strangeness or novelty. Volunteer tourists are frequent travelers (Brown & Morrison, 2003) and they pursue more novelty than familiarity. From the sociological point of view, they are more close to the explorer in Cohen’s classification.

From a social-psychological perspective, Iso-Ahola (1983) proposes that people may tend to travel as an escape after encountering personal troubles or failures, while the gained travel experience in turn could improve intra- and interpersonal esteem and social status. A similar concept appears in Dann’s theory of anomie and ego-enhancement (1977, 1981).

From Dann’s point of view (1981), tourist motivation is “a meaningful state of mind which adequately disposes an actor or group of actors to travel, and which is subsequently interpretable by others as a valid explanation for such as decision” (p. 205). Dann (1977, 1981) further proposes that the reasons people engage in travel are influenced by the attraction of the destination (pull factors) and their psychological needs (push factors). The push factors related to the motivations include anomie and ego-enhancement: anomie means that people’s desire to escape from daily life can be fulfilled by traveling, while ego-enhancement means people need to be recognized by others. Travel provides opportunities to satisfy the need to escape and to re-establish a tourist’s ego, albeit temporarily (Dann, 1977, 1981). Applying the concept to volunteer tourism, people who can afford this alternative tourism might be regarded in a more positive way by sharing money, free time, ability, courage, and goodwill, which can increase self-esteem or social status.

Wearing, Deville, and Lyons (2008), linking to symbolic interactionism in sociology, argued that individuals could transform leisure into self-exploration through volunteer tourism. Volunteer tourism as a leisure activity satisfies individuals for searching for a more meaningful experience or life and provides a chance of self-discovery and self-understanding which one cannot get from his/her routine daily life as Kelly (1983) mentioned cited in Wearing et al. (2008, p. 64).

Considering volunteer tourism trips with different characteristics, Broad’s study (2003) of volunteer tourists with long duration trips concluded that the motivations of volunteer tourists focus on personal interest and travel. For university students in eco-oriented volunteer research program, motivations include personal development and academic achievement (Galley & Clifton, 2004). Weiler and Richins (1995) investigated a more scientific oriented project, the Australia Earthwatch expedition, and found participants’ main reasons for joining the project were a desire to do something meaningful or conservation oriented, an interest in the subject matter, a desire to learn new things or be challenged, and an interest in helping researchers. Also, the demographics of participants, such as age, have some effects on motivation (Okun &

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