



# Internet promotional material and conservation volunteer tourist motivations: A case study of selecting organizations and projects<sup>☆</sup>

Kerry E. Grimm<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mark D. Needham<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Environmental Sciences, 104 Wilkinson Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, 321 Richardson Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Although much research has discussed why tourists volunteer abroad, little work has explored the role of promotional material (e.g., internet websites) in volunteer decisions. We examined if promotional material played a motivating role in volunteer tourists' decision to select specific organizations or conservation projects, and if so, what in the material influenced their choices. We also identified types of promotional material used and how volunteers accessed this information. To collect data, we engaged in participant observation and conducted interviews at a conservation volunteer project in Ecuador with 36 volunteer tourists, 2 managers, and 3 volunteer coordinators. Findings revealed that volunteers almost exclusively used the internet to search for volunteer tourism opportunities. Volunteer decisions to select the organization or project were influenced by both website appearance (e.g., organized, professional) and specific content (e.g., photographs, volunteer comments, project descriptions, buzzwords). We discuss implications for managers and organizations, tourism theory, and future research.

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## 1. Introduction

The number of people traveling to other countries to volunteer for conservation or humanitarian projects has increased substantially in the past three decades (Brown & Morrison, 2003). These tourists "volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment" (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Some volunteers apply to intermediary organizations (e.g., i-to-i) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), whereas others contact project sites directly.

With the growth of volunteer tourism, research on the subject has also increased. Popular topics of study include motivations (e.g., Broad, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2005; Galley & Clifton, 2004; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Ureily, Reichel, & Ron, 2003; Wearing, 2001, 2004) and values (e.g., Campbell & Smith, 2006; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003). Researchers have also focused on benefits of volunteer tourism, including volunteer self-fulfillment

and personal growth, helping projects and contributing new insights, spreading knowledge, positive host–guest relationships, and positive social movements (e.g., Brown & Lehto, 2005; Foster-Smith & Evans, 2003; Lepp, 2008; McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Ruhanen, Cooper, & Fayos-Solá, 2008; Wearing, 2001). Although some of these researchers interviewed only volunteers, others also talked with community members and project staff to determine their impressions of benefits and disadvantages of volunteer tourism (e.g., Clifton & Benson, 2006; Coghlan, 2008; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Lepp, 2008; McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Sin, 2010).

Few researchers, however, have explicitly addressed the influence of promotional material (e.g., brochures, internet websites) in motivating volunteers, especially specific content or images in this material that attract volunteers to projects or organizations (e.g., Coghlan, 2007; Cousins, Evans, & Saddler, 2009; Simpson, 2004). When researchers have discussed connections between promotional material and motivations, it usually has been ancillary to the main focus of their research or examined in relation to how this material appealed to motivations for volunteering abroad more generally (e.g., adventure, danger; Ansell, 2008; Simpson, 2005). Researchers who have explored how promotional material influenced volunteer decisions about organizations and projects often employed textual analysis of the material, but rarely interviewed volunteers directly to verify if and how this material played a motivating role (e.g., Coghlan, 2007; Young, 2008).

Not understanding the role of promotional material in influencing volunteer decisions is an important knowledge gap because in the increasingly competitive volunteer tourism market, projects and

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, 321 Richardson Hall, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA. Tel.: +1 845 323 7766.

E-mail addresses: [kerry.grimm@oregonstate.edu](mailto:kerry.grimm@oregonstate.edu) (K.E. Grimm), [mark.needham@oregonstate.edu](mailto:mark.needham@oregonstate.edu) (M.D. Needham).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 541 737 1498.

organizations must advertise projects and services to recruit volunteers necessary for monetary and physical support (Cousins et al., 2009). Organizations and project managers could benefit from and create effective promotional material by understanding: (a) if this material played a role in motivating volunteers to choose organizations and projects, (b) types of promotional material used by volunteers, (c) how volunteers accessed this information, and (d) topics in promotional material that played a motivating role. To address these issues, we interviewed volunteer tourists, project managers,<sup>2</sup> and volunteer coordinators to explore how and what factors in promotional material motivated individuals to select organizations and conservation project sites. This work advances motivation research and may aid organizations and project managers in recruiting volunteer tourists for conservation work.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Motivations

Wearing (2004) stated that motivations of volunteer tourists could be examined using a variety of theories from tourism, recreation, leisure, and volunteerism (e.g., Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Driver & Knopf, 1977; Driver, Tinsley, & Manfredi, 1991; Iso-Ahola, 1989; Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Stebbins, 1996). One such theory is the push/pull approach, which suggests that people are pushed to travel by certain internal motivations (e.g., stress reduction) and/or pulled to a particular destination by its attributes—both tangible resources (e.g., beaches) and traveler perceptions and expectations of what the destination provides (e.g., novelty; Crompton, 1979; Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). These push and pull factors are essential in motivating tourists (Dann, 1981), and Crompton (1979) identified seven push factors (e.g., escape from perceived mundane environment, exploration and evaluation of self, facilitation of social interaction) and two pull factors (cultural motives, novelty). Many researchers have applied this framework to study motivations of tourists (e.g., Delamere & Wright, 1997; Fluker & Turner, 2000).

This push/pull approach is only one way to understand motivations. Iso-Ahola (1979, 1989) contended that all leisure motivations can be classified as seeking or escaping in that people seek intrinsic rewards and escape everyday problems and troubles (Iso-Ahola, 1982, 1989). Utilizing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Pearce and Caltabiano (1983) and Pearce and Lee (2005) formulated the Travel Career Ladder (TCL) and Travel Career Pattern (TCP), which illustrates that inexperienced tourists are more interested in fulfilling lower order needs (e.g., relationship, stimulation, relaxation), whereas experienced tourists are motivated to fulfill higher order needs (e.g., development, fulfillment). Another approach to motivations contends that they are formed by the expectation that efforts to participate (e.g., spend money, time) will lead to performance (e.g., backpack in wilderness), which will result in outcomes and benefits (e.g., stress release; Driver et al., 1991; Manfredi, Driver, & Brown, 1983; Manfredi, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996). To measure motivations, Driver et al. (1991) created the Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales. These include over 300 variables grouped into 19 domains, most of which represent internal push factors (e.g., enjoy nature, meet new people, escape personal/social pressures; Driver et al., 1991; Manfredi et al., 1983).

Studies in volunteerism also have examined motivations, especially those related to decisions to volunteer. Most researchers recognize that volunteering usually contains both altruistic and self-interested motivations (e.g., King & Lynch, 1998). Others, however, have emphasized either altruistic or self-interested motivations, but not both.

Stebbins (1996), for example, suggested that volunteering is a form of serious leisure and self-interestedness is a greater driving force than altruism because volunteers expect personal and social rewards for the activity. To measure motivations for volunteering, Clary, Snyder, and Stukas (1996) and Clary et al. (1998) created the Volunteer Functions Index (VFI), which demarcated six functions: values, understanding, enhancement, career, protective, and social. Silverberg, Ellis, Backman, and Backman (1999) and Silverberg, Ellis, Whitworth, and Kane (2002/2003) applied this index to volunteers in parks and recreation and determined that it described volunteer functions, but additional co-producer functions existed (e.g., “department and community need me,” “benefits to people I know”). Environmental volunteering has required an expansion of motivations identified in human volunteering to account for specific motivations related to the environment or animals, such as to help the environment and work with specific animal species (e.g., Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Grese, Kaplan, Ryan, & Buxton, 2000; Markus & Blackshaw, 1998).

Researchers of volunteer tourism have used these approaches to examine why people volunteer abroad, and to a lesser extent why they chose the country, organization, or project. Similar to findings from broader volunteering, volunteer tourists hold both altruistic (e.g., desire to help, give back, make a difference) and self-interested motivations for volunteering abroad (e.g., authentic travel, gain experience, engage in travel and adventure, learn, pleasure-seeking, personal growth, cultural exchange, professional development, camaraderie; Broad, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Caissie & Halpenny, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2005; Chen & Chen, 2011; Wearing, 2001, 2004). Pearce and Coghlan (2008) contended that the TCP could predict similarities and differences in motivations of experienced and inexperienced volunteer tourists. Both groups would be motivated by novelty, escape/relaxation, and relationship, but less experienced volunteer tourists would provide a larger range of motivations and veterans would emphasize involvement with host communities and settings. Despite this body of research on volunteer tourist motivations, most of this work has examined altruistic and self-interested motivations that primarily push individuals to participate.

Comparatively less research has examined pull motivations of volunteer tourists, especially attributes that draw individuals to a specific country or continent, organization, or project (e.g., Söderman & Snead, 2008). Researchers who have discussed these issues either mentioned findings briefly or secondary to their research focus (e.g., Simpson, 2005). Reasons for why volunteers select a country or continent included danger, the unknown, scenery, to conduct specific projects that occur in certain countries (e.g., sea turtle work), to learn a language, timing, family or friend recommendations, and the belief that developing countries need help (Campbell & Smith, 2005; Simpson, 2005; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Wearing, 2004). Research has shown that volunteer tourists select an organization for its reputation, program variety and structure, marketing, safety, specific projects (e.g., sea turtle projects), organization type (e.g., NGO), people involved, and recommendations from family or friends (Campbell & Smith, 2005; Coghlan, 2007; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Wearing, 2001). Reasons people are attracted to specific volunteer projects include recommendations from others, as well as project location, opportunities, and perks (Broad, 2003; Caissie & Halpenny, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2005).

### 2.2. Promotional material

Researchers studying promotional material have examined it in conjunction with push motivations. In non-tourism situations, for example, advertisements appealing to internal personal motivations of potential volunteers were more persuasive in encouraging people to volunteer (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Miene, & Haugen, 1994). In volunteer tourism, promotional material has advertised the volunteer

<sup>2</sup> The managers were also directors of the reserve. For clarity, we only use “manager” throughout the article.

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