



## Progress in Tourism Management

## Motivations and perceived value of volunteer tourists from Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the motivational factors and perceived value of Hong Kong volunteer tourists. The results of a focus group and in-depth interviews reveal five main motives for travelers to partake in volunteer trips: cultural immersion and interaction with the local people; desire to give back and show love and concern; a shared experience with family members and an educational opportunity for children; religious involvement; and escape from everyday life. The perceived value of these volunteer travelers includes personal growth and development, relationship enhancement, and change in perspective on life. The factors influencing their future decision to participate in volunteer tourism include time, financial ability, safety and health issues, arrangements and scale of the tour, and reputation of the organizer.

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## 1. Introduction

International tourism has changed substantially in the last few decades. Since the mid-1960s, mass tourism has emerged as a popular leisure activity. However, people are becoming less likely to be satisfied with the experience of mass tourism. Travelers are more sophisticated and they increasingly seek unique and meaningful travel experiences to satisfy their specific needs and desires (Hall & Weiler, 1992; Robinson & Novelli, 2005).

Volunteer tourism refers to tourists who pay to travel to another location where they volunteer in organized projects that involve helping communities by such means as distributing necessities and other resources, restoring and conserving environments, or assisting in field research (Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001). Volunteer tourism offers meaningful experiences to travelers as they volunteer to improve some aspect(s) of the host community during their visit. This type of tourism contributes not only to the personal growth and satisfaction of travelers but also to the development of the host community and its culture (Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

There is increasing awareness of and interest and participation in some form of volunteer travel among travelers (Rogers, 2007). A wide range of volunteer projects and tours is available. Travelers can participate in building schools, homes, and orphanages in developing countries, taking care of lions in South Africa (Rogers, 2007), elephants in Thailand (Carter, 2005), or sea turtles in Costa Rica (Campbell & Smith, 2006), conducting research on environmental or

societal issues (Wearing, 2001), conserving the natural environment (American Hiking Society, 2008), teaching English to children, or assisting in construction projects (Ambassadors for Children, 2008).

Globally, various companies or organizations are doing their very best to build international awareness of volunteer tourism. They strive to promote this type of tourism around the world by educating, providing valuable information and advice, and collaborating with different stakeholder groups such as the host community, non-profit organizations, NGOs, and individual travelers (VolunTourism.org, 2008). International tour operators also act as effective facilitators of volunteer tourism and aim to provide meaningful experiences for travelers (Rogers, 2007). Thousands of volunteers are sent to work on projects in different countries worldwide each year. Sometimes, charities cooperate with tour operators to create fundraising travel tours or volunteer projects (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). In so doing, the charities can diversify their funding sources, while the tour operators can raise the profile of the companies and promote themselves as socially responsible and ethical (McCallin, 2001). Some tour operators are also involved in promoting volunteer tourism by providing comprehensive international travel and study information that helps to connect prospective volunteer travelers with organizations providing these opportunities (GoAbroad.com, 2008).

The growth of volunteer tourism, particularly among travelers in the Western countries, has motivated researchers, marketers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to conduct research to learn more about the motivations of these travelers, their contribution to the host community, and other related issues (O'Daly, 2007). It is of paramount importance to understand the travel motivation of volunteer tourists because it is the driving force behind their

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behavior. Fodness (1994) and Crompton (1979) suggested that more knowledge of tourism motivation is necessary to assist tourism marketers in understanding the travel patterns of individuals so that appropriate tourism products can be developed in accordance with their needs and wants. In addition, studying their perceptions of the value of volunteer trips will help to determine their intentions to re-engage in or recommend volunteer travel opportunities.

Over the past decade, a number of studies in volunteer tourism have been conducted. Some common themes of these researches looked at the motivation and perceived benefits of engaging in volunteer tourism (Broad, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Söderman & Snead, 2009). Some focused on the experience of participating in volunteer ecotourism and volunteer conservation expeditions (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Lepp, 2009a, 2009b). One studied the difference between the projected and perceived images of volunteer tourism organizations (Coghlan, 2007). However, all of these studies were conducted with Western population. More research needs to be done to understand the motivations of these volunteer tourists and their perceptions of the value attained through their volunteer tourism experiences in different parts of the world.

Volunteer tourism is at its infancy in Hong Kong. Over the past few years, more Hong Kong residents have the opportunities to travel abroad and involve in volunteer work at the same time. Some tour operators organize conservation volunteer tours to Australia and New Zealand and visits to local communities in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Jordan, and mainland China. Volunteer work may be one component of their travel itineraries. Other volunteer travel opportunities are provided by non-profit organizations and mainly target secondary school and undergraduate students. These volunteers will usually be involved in teaching English and simple hygiene knowledge to local people and providing basic medical care and treatment for patients in needy communities. Voluntary organization also combines travel with public services by asking every volunteer tourist to carry one kilogram of books or stationeries to students in rural China (1KG MORE, 2009). Some volunteers of religious groups are involved in mission trips to various impoverished places abroad. They provide education and development aid in the needy communities and at the same time preach their religion and belief. The tsunami in 2004 and 512 Wenchuan earthquakes in Sichuan, China in 2008 provided opportunities for Hong Kong people to participate in emergency relief and long-term recovery assistance to disaster-affected sites (e.g. China Action Love Volunteer Association, 2008; Raleigh Hong Kong, 2009; Sowers Action, 2009; Tsunami Volunteer Center, 2009).

The current study was designed to explore the motivations for and perceived value of volunteer tourists from Hong Kong. The results of this study can help tourism marketers and professionals and potential service providers such as NGOs and travel agencies to identify their potential markets, and organize more volunteer tours and diversify tourism products in Hong Kong. Non-profit organizations can better understand why people choose to volunteer overseas, segment the markets, create tailor-made volunteer tours to recruit more travelers to become volunteers, and develop appropriate marketing strategies to promote volunteer tourism. The objectives of this study were to identify the motivations of volunteer tourists from Hong Kong, their perceived value attained through volunteer tours, and the factors affecting their decision to participate in such tourism in the future.

## 2. Background of the study

### 2.1. Volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism, also known as “voluntourism,” refers to tourists who pay to travel to another location where they choose to

use their free time to engage in meaningful experiences (Wearing, 2001). They are involved in helping communities by such means as distributing necessities and other resources, restoring and conserving environments, or assisting in field research related to protecting the environment or endangered species of animals (Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001). Wearing and Neil (2000) describe volunteer tourism as a personal experience people engage in to fulfill intrinsic motivation which can benefit the participant’s life and the host community.

Uriely, Reichel, and Ron (2003) suggest that volunteer tourism emphasizes the growing appeal of concepts such as “alternative”, “real”, “ecological”, and “responsible” forms of tourism. They are seen as other dimensions of postmodern tourism. Many individuals may not perceive themselves to be volunteer tourists (Lyons, 2003); rather, they may believe that they are participating in adventure tourism (Swarbrooke et al., 2003), ecotourism (Campbell & Smith, 2006; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Weiler & Richens, 1995), or even environmental research tourism (Ellis, 2003).

### 2.2. Who are the volunteer tourists?

Callanan and Thomas (2005) classified volunteer tourists as “shallow”, “intermediate,” or “deep” based on the duration of the volunteer trip, the skills or qualifications required of participants, the degree of involvement (passive or active) of volunteer tourists, their level of contribution to local communities, and the focus of the experience (altruistic or self-interested). Brown and Morrison (2003) found two types of volunteer tourists: volunteer-minded tourists who are willing to spend most or all of their vacation volunteering, and vacation-minded volunteer tourists who devote only some of their vacation time to volunteer work.

People of different age groups have varied travel styles and attitude towards the type of travel experiences they prefer. Pearce and Coghlan (2009) highlighted that the classification of baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1964), generation X (those born from 1965 to 1979) and generation Y (those born in 1980 or after) have been used in studies on tourists. The Gen Y cohort is presently the main target market for volunteer tourism. They include students who take volunteer tours during their spring break or summer vacation (Brown & Lehto, 2005; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Rogers, 2007). Some students choose to take a gap year from education and participate in overseas volunteer projects (Simpson, 2004; Söderman & Snead, 2009). Gen Yers are Internet-savvy, better educated, and more affluent as they are supported by their parents for a longer period of time (Strass & Howe, 2008). They are more aware of global problems and sustainability issues (Pearce & Coghlan, 2009). Yesawich (2008) believed that the Y generation prefers products that allow them to express individuality while still remaining part of the group. While some “extra” things may be seen as attentive and responsive by previous generations, there is a possibility that Gen Y finds it tedious and unnecessary (Atkinson, 2008). This contrasts the older generations who sometimes seek products and services to distinguish one’s self from the norm. Work-life balance is not just a buzz word for them, they want flexibility and jobs that accommodate to their family and personal lives which may possibly translate to increased leisure time as opposed to the “money rich, time poor” generations before them (Raines, 2002). In recent years, volunteer tourism is attracting an increasing number of mature travelers with different interests and abilities (Travel with a challenge, 2008). These older travelers, mainly from the baby boomer generation, participate in volunteer tourism because they have a strong interest in a particular cause, project, or subject area that may be related to their hobby or an earlier career. Some want to visit a region in a “grassroots” way, which is not feasible in traditional leisure travel and others want to give back to society.

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