TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE VOLUNTEER TOURISM EXPERIENCE

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in the Tourism Program, School of Business at
James Cook University
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DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Human* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H1634 & H1719).

_________________________________________________________  ____________________________
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Alexandra Coghlan
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ABSTRACT

A new form of tourism, volunteer tourism, has been put forward as a solution to an apparent decreasing public understanding of environmental debates and financial commitment towards resolving conservation concerns. This tourism sector makes use of holiday-makers who volunteer to fund and work on conservation projects around the world and aims to provide to provide sustainable alternative travel that can assist in community development, scientific research or ecological restoration. Unlike ecotourism where profit drives the operator, many volunteer tourism companies are non-profit organisations, whose aim is to allow travellers to work alongside researchers on environmentally or socially beneficial projects. Such volunteer work provides a means for direct interaction between environmental scientists and the general public and is a potentially powerful tool for creating an increasingly global environmental ethic.

Previous studies of volunteer tourism suggest that participants share similar characteristics to (extreme) ecotourists, i.e. tourists who desire a high level of interaction with the environment, to be environmentally responsible and to be challenged, but unlike ecotourists, volunteer tourists are believed to be motivated by a sense of altruism. Researchers describe the volunteer tourism experience as a form of serious leisure, with a focus on learning and contributing to a worthwhile cause. Other motivations that have been associated with volunteer tourism, volunteering and tourism include escape, relaxation, relationship enhancement, self-development, building a personal power base, advancing a personal agenda, developing a career that leads to status or other rewards, interest in the subject matter, and an interest in helping the researcher. How ubiquitous these motivations are and how they shape the volunteer tourism experience is not yet understood.

This research investigated the volunteer tourists’ expectations and experiences in order to enhance volunteer tourism’s potential as a conservation tool. It sought to identify key variables and factors which shape this sector; and to prepare the way for subsequent large scale empirical studies. It applied new data collection tools (a daily diary) to a new field of tourism research (the volunteer tourism experience). The research aims were (i) to identify differences between organisational images that might lead to different volunteer tourist experiences (Study One), (ii) to
determine the socio-demographic and motivational profiles of volunteer tourists (Study Two), (iii) to examine volunteer tourists’ experiences and to identify patterns of experience and the elements that lead to a satisfying experience (Study Three), and finally (iv) to understand the experience from the expedition staff’s point of view (Study Four).

Study One looked at a sample of volunteer tourism organisations (n=29) to identify their projected and perceived organisational images. The former were investigated by assessing promotional photographs, mission statements and volunteer tourist testimonies, and the latter were analysed using a multiple sorting procedure performed by 30 postgraduate students. Based on the results, a general typology was developed resulting in four groups – “research conservation” expeditions, “holiday conservation” expeditions, “adventure holiday” expeditions and “community holiday” expeditions. The four groups could be distinguished based on their mission statements, photographs, testimonies, and sorting criteria.

Study Two investigated the expectations, motivations and socio-demographic profiles of volunteer tourists. Volunteers from six organisations (n=77) were studied using a diary-based method. This relatively small sample size was due to the nature of volunteer tourism (infrequent trips with small groups in very remote locations). Distinct socio-demographic and motivational profiles were found: four organisations appeared to attract a younger market with a lower level of prior conservation involvement, less travel experience and who were motivated by personal development and experiential and recreational goals, while two organisations catered to an older market, who have a higher level of conservation involvement and travel experience and who were more motivated to learn and help the researcher.

Study Three investigated volunteer tourist experiences based on the findings from the previous two studies. The positive and negative elements of their volunteer tourism experiences were investigated, along with on-site satisfaction and moods. The results indicated that whilst most of the volunteer tourists’ motivations and expectations were fulfilled, their moods, satisfaction levels and overall assessment of the expedition were dependent on the presence of four elements: the opportunity for skill/knowledge development, having fun, experiencing new things, and contributing to a worthwhile project. Furthermore, certain experience patterns could be identified from the volunteer tourists’ diaries; some volunteers were confident
and highly involved in the expedition, some were slightly more anxious and did not become so involved in all aspects of the expedition, whilst others were primarily concerned with their own achievements, and lastly some show lower levels of involvement in the project.

The final study investigated the staff’s expectations of the volunteers. Staff were asked to describe their qualifications for the job and the role they expected the volunteers to fulfil, to rate the items from Study Two that might have motivated their volunteers to join the expedition and to assess the volunteers’ performance. In most cases, staff placed a greater emphasis on the volunteering and research aspects of the expedition, often to the detriment of fun and social elements. They felt their science and research experience qualified them for the job, that volunteers should be hard working and perform to the best of their ability.

Overall, the research revealed that whilst volunteer tourists have poorly defined expectations of their expedition, they are generally satisfied as long as the four elements mentioned above are present during the expedition. The need for fun and new and different experiences contradict previous notions of volunteer tourism as a form of serious leisure involving altruistic motivations. Moreover, staff could be made more aware of the different roles they are to fulfil during the expedition.

Methodological and conceptual contributions of this research include the development of an experience data collection tool and an integrative approach to studying volunteer tourism. The role of altruism as a motivating force was challenged, whilst the importance of having fun, contributing to a worthwhile project, learning and experiencing new and different things was highlighted. Opportunities for future research into the role of personality, staff attitudes and volunteer rewards, as well as the organisation’s evaluation of volunteer tourism as a form of recreation experience were presented. Furthermore, some of the variables that define this sector and may be useful employed in an Equity model of volunteer tourism were identified and may be used to refine the current state of knowledge regarding volunteer tourism as an exchange of services and benefits between two parties. Finally, recommendations are made to help enhance volunteer tourism’s potential as a conservation tool.
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A PERSONAL NOTE

The thesis is not the first, nor will be it be the last, to be written as a result of a deeply personal concern for the future of our natural environment and the safeguarding of our life support systems.

This concern comes from a growing feeling among natural scientists that humankind has lost its place in nature and disrupted the balance that has come about from 3.5 billion years of co-evolution between the 10 million or species that exist on this earth. Some of the greatest scientists of our time, many of them Nobel Prize winners, came together to produce a document that began:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.

On a personal level, I believe, as stated by Rupert Holzapfel in his thesis that “everyday I experience and contribute, on a human timescale, to the exhaustion of non-renewable fossil fuels and mineral deposits, the overuse of natural resources and the pollution of the natural environment”.

Many among us would agree with this statement and are chagrined by it. It is those of us who have been privileged enough to experience the natural world, who have sought it out, or who live with it daily who feel this most keenly. However, this group is a minority in Western society where most of the population live in cities and have little access to the natural world.

This thesis argues that experiential tourism and travelling can change the way we think about the world and interact with nature. The emphasis throughout the thesis will be on EXPERIENCE, for, as Saint-Exupery states “You can only understand the world according to what you have experienced”. Volunteer tourism provides tourists with an opportunity to experience the natural world in a new and intense way, highlighting the need for conservation and the ability of each person to make a difference. Now, we must ensure that this experience is a positive on and that each and every tourist comes away with a new sense of our stewardship of life on Earth.

The natural world is the maternal of our being as earthlings and life-giving nourishment of our physical, emotional, aesthetic, moral and religious existence. The natural world is the larger community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human. To damage this community is to diminish our own existence.

- Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth