
III Journeys at the Edge: Overlaps and Ambiguities



12 All for a Good Cause? The Blurred Boundaries of Volunteering and Tourism

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Research has provided a wealth of typological models that help classify tourist behaviours. These taxonomies have been developed based on a broad range of increasingly sophisticated criteria associated with social roles, motivations, activity types, socio-demographics, travel experiences, lifestyles, values and personality (Lyons, 2003). Indeed some of the case studies in this book classify particular forms of volunteer tourism. Proponents of typological research argue that it provides a valuable foundation upon which action can be taken. For example, the principles of market segmentation in tourism are based on the premise that particular types of travellers can be categorized and their needs identified and met through the development of niche products.

Recently, the dominance of typological research has come under criticism. Franklin and Crang (2001) argue that the proliferation of increasingly fine-tuned and elaborate typologies and a general 'craze for classification' (p. 6.) has emerged from viewing tourism as 'a series of discrete, enumerated occurrences of travel, arrival, activity, purchase, departure' (p.13) where tourists are seen as another incarnation of 'Rational Economic Man' (p.13). As a result, there has been an unchallenged belief underlying travel and tourism research that increasingly finer-tuned and elaborate typologies will eventually form a classificatory grid in which definition and regulation can occur (Franklin and Crang, 2001). However, Cohen (1974) argues that it is precisely the fuzziness of tourism categories and the blurred margins it creates that enables conceptual relationships and advancements to be made with other forms of social and cultural activities.

In this chapter we delve into this 'fuzziness' to examine the overlaps and ambiguities of volunteer tourism. This chapter introduces the case studies in this part of the book that provides some critical understandings of volunteer tourism that may be overlooked if a narrower and more rigid view was adopted. In particular, we examine diverse manifestations of the intersections between volunteering and tourism that extend beyond the definition of volunteer tourists

as those who 'volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve the 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. 240). The following discussion examines three examples of such intersections: service learning, cultural exchange programmes and fund-raising adventure tourism, and considers how each of these challenges conventional views of volunteer tourism.

Service Learners or Coerced Volunteers?

It was once generally agreed that a volunteer was someone who offered service, time and skills to benefit others (Beigbeder, 1991), provided voluntary personal aid while living in developing communities (Clark, 1978) and gained mutual learning, friendship and adventurousness (Gillette, 1968). Volunteers were recognized as those who provided assistance or service for the benefit of the community through formal involvement in an organization, and/or independently as an individual (Australian Bureau Statistics, 1986). The concept of volunteering [AU1] has also been defined as an action perceived as freely chosen, without financial gain, and generally aimed at helping others (Stebbins, 1992).

Many of these early definitions placed altruistic motives at the centre of voluntary behaviour (Lyons, 2003). However, the implied altruism associated with 'helping' has been called into question (see Wearing, 2001). While volunteers almost always help others, the motives for such action are not always primarily altruistic. A number of the cases presented earlier in this book show that contemporary volunteer tourists are motivated by factors such as the opportunity to travel, to develop social connections or to develop skills that will help with one's career (see Chapters 7 and 10, this volume).

The promise of skills development and improved employability underpins a number of international volunteering experiences that are not branded as volunteer tourism but are packaged and marketed, primarily by Universities in developed countries such as Australia and the USA, as service learning. Jacoby and Associates (1996) explain that, unlike traditional models of work experience, service learning is unique because it is based upon reciprocity and reflection. Reciprocity refers to what is traditionally the central focus of work experiences where volunteer learners provide their labour and in return, gain skills and knowledge from the experience. The reflection component involves a mirroring process where students examine how an experience relates to how they see themselves and how they would like to be seen (Brown and McCartney, 1999).

The expansion of service learning from domestic experiences to overseas experiences reflects the globalization of higher education (Porter and Monhard, 2001). The advent of specialized areas of study such as international development studies and international business has meant that a growing number of students are being expected to seek out first-hand experiences that will provide a practical foundation to their studies. Likewise, there is growing demand for service-learning experiences in developing countries among service professional

education programmes such as teaching, nursing, medicine and social work. The length and nature of these service-learning experiences vary widely from 1-week study tours that incorporate a short volunteering activity, through to semester or year-long study-abroad programmes that feature significant voluntary work commitments (Myers-Lipton, 1996).

The value of international service learning is well recognized in higher education institutions and is increasingly seen as a non-negotiable component of undergraduate education (Roberts, 2003). Increasingly, students who undertake such experiences do so because of the expectation that such experience is essential for one's education and future career. Conceptually, these experiences can be considered a form of what Ellis (1997) describes as mandated or coerced volunteering which also describes work for the dole schemes and court-ordered community service. Ellis (1997) points out that there has been little consideration in the literature given to these volunteer experiences that emerge from contexts where there is little choice.

While the value of these experiences has been analysed and documented (c.f. Myers-Lipton, 1996), warnings have been sounded that reflect similar concerns, raised in this volume, about the impact of volunteer tourism upon host–visitor relationships and understandings. As Grusky (2000) suggests:

International service-learning programs burst with potential and stumble with the weight of contradictions left unattended. Without thoughtful preparation, orientation, program developments and the encouragement of study, as well as critical analysis and reflection, the programs can easily become small theaters that recreate historic cultural misunderstandings and simplistic stereotypes and replay, on a more intimate scale, the huge disparities in income and opportunity that characterize North–South relations today.

(p. 858)

The implications of this trend in education towards requiring graduates to have undertaken voluntary service abroad raise important questions about efficacy and ethics. It is unknown if the reduction or removal of choice from these volunteer tourists impacts the quality of their voluntary work, the degree to which it creates cultural empathy and understanding and whether it creates more problems for host communities than it solves.

Cultural Ambassadors or More?

Traditionally, volunteers have been seen as those individuals who receive no monetary compensation for their voluntary efforts (Brudney, 2000). However, over the last decade, the blurring of paid and voluntary work has become commonplace (Lyons, 2003). Indeed, it has been the practice of large service agencies such as the US Peace Corps and VISTA to not only include reimbursement to volunteers for out-of-pocket expenses but to also provide cash and in-kind incentives such as college fee payments, thereby blurring the line between 'stipended volunteering and low paying jobs' (Ellis, 1997, p. 29). These blurred boundaries are very evident in new forms of cultural exchange programmes

that have proliferated in the last two decades and are major players in providing travel experiences to young people wishing to travel abroad for extended periods (Lyons, 2003).

Cultural exchange programmes have long been associated with promoting tolerance, goodwill and understanding of cultural differences (White, 2002), and have been identified by politicians as a cure-all to a range of deeply ingrained regional conflicts (see Netanyahu, 1998). Proponents of programmes designed to facilitate cultural exchange emphasize their importance in terms of broad macro-level relationships between countries and cultures that help rid nations of the 'neo-coloniality' (Altbach and Lewis, 1998, p. 54). However, some critics argue that much of the rhetoric about the value of exchange programmes masks the fact that cultural exchange reinforces capitalism and the values of globalization (Iriye, 1997). These ideological debates about the purpose and role of cultural exchange suggest that these programmes are indeed contexts rife with ambiguities.

Although macro-claims and concerns about cultural exchange programmes are worthwhile considering, it is the direct micro-interactions between participants and host communities that are central to understanding cultural exchange programmes. It is at this micro-level that an overlap between volunteer tourism and cultural exchange becomes more evident. Wearing (2001) has argued that it is the minutia of direct interaction between the volunteer tourist and the host community that promotes long-lasting, socially and environmentally positive impacts. This interactive exchange described by Wearing suggests that volunteer tourism may well be viewed as a subset of cultural exchange. However, it is also at this micro-level of interaction where ambiguities associated with participants' roles in cultural exchange programmes become reality.

Over the last two decades there has been a shift away from primarily education-based cultural exchange programmes that proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s such as teacher and student exchanges, towards more eclectic programmes that incorporate an ever-growing range of occupations and recreational pursuits (Murphy, 1995). Accompanying these newer programmes is a complex relationship between the participant, host organizations, sponsoring agencies and host country legal and political entities. Participants in these contemporary exchange programmes negotiate their way through an array of ambiguous and sometimes conflicting roles. A study of the J-1 Camp Counselor Visitor exchange programme participants demonstrates this (see Lyons, 2003).

The J-1 Cultural exchange programme was designed to promote cultural understanding at summer camps in the USA by enabling young adults from around the globe to work in American camps. However, camp directors, the sponsoring agencies, the US State Department which issues the visas, American camp staff and the participants themselves each had differing views as to what constituted the role of participants in the programme. Ultimately, it was unclear as to whether they were paid employees of a particular camping organization, volunteers, or cultural goodwill ambassadors (Lyons, 2003).

The lack of clarity about the role of an individual participating in a cultural exchange programme creates what has been described in the literature as role ambiguity. Role ambiguity describes the degree to which individuals are unclear about the pattern of behaviours that are expected of them (Wolverton *et al.*,

1999). Role ambiguity has been negatively correlated with job performance and employee satisfaction and is therefore, an undesirable condition from the perspective of any organization. Some researchers differentiate between job task ambiguity and job role ambiguity, with the former referring to the lack of clarity about what specific duties are associated with a role and the latter referring to ambiguity about expected behaviours and relationships that shape and define a role (Tubre and Collins, 2000). In the case of exchange programmes it is the latter definition that is most relevant. The highly convoluted administrative and bureaucratic system that supports many exchange programmes, and indeed many volunteer tourism experiences, creates multiple and contradictory roles for participants (Lyons, 2003). Role ambiguity is a very real and potentially devastating consequence of programmes that suffer from what Oldsen (1983) described as bureaucratic hypotrophy. Multiple levels of organizational, political and governmental controls impinge upon the access to these programmes. In volunteer tourism the multiplicity of agency, operators and host communities encountered by the volunteer tourist creates similar challenges.

Fund-raising Adventurers or Volunteer Tourists?

In the introductory chapter to this book, we argued that NGOs offer and support alternative tourism by engaging in a decommodified process of face-to-face exchange between host communities and volunteers. However, the development of fund-raising adventure tourism, a recent innovation in the way this exchange has been provided by NGOs, raises important questions about whether volunteering and touring components of volunteer tourism need to be in the same temporal and geographical space.

NGOs have had to face the very real issues of economic sustainability that is central to the viability of the community-based projects they provide. In the early 1980s increasing pressure upon NGOs and other non-profit organizations led many executive directors to explore creative alternatives for fund-raising and financial support. While traditional forms of revenue had previously come from grants and philanthropists, the tightening of belts associated with the recession and the economic rationalism of multi-corporates lead to diminishing funds (Dichter, 1999). Increasingly sophisticated approaches to funding NGO projects emerged that moved beyond traditional funding drives such as telethons, or door knock appeals. The notion of value-adding crept into NGOs fund-raising strategies and in the early 1970s, community events such as walk-athons, fun runs and other competitive and non-competitive events became important fund-raising products for these organizations (Dichter, 1999). However, the development of fund-raising adventure tours is a departure from these leisure activities, blending the voluntary act of fund-raising with the more traditional hedonic pleasures of a packaged adventure tour, positioning them as an ambiguous form of volunteer tourism.

A recent study of participants in a fund-raising challenge suggests that volunteer tourism might be expanded if we are able to move outside current assumptions about its spatial and temporal boundaries. Lyons (2007) analysed

the diaries and web blogs of 25 individuals who participated in fund-raising/cycling adventures with Oxfam Australia–Oxfam Challenge programme. The adventure fund-raising tour conducted by Oxfam Australia is marketed as an adventure experience with a difference. Oxfam Australia recruits participants willing to raise \$5000 which in part covers the cost of a 2-week cycling tour through remote villages in China, Vietnam or Cambodia. Fund-raising was done by individuals prior to participating in the tour in a variety of traditional ways such as seeking individual and corporate sponsorship and through organizing fund-raising events such as trivia nights. The bicycle tour itself incorporated scenic and challenging cycling routes that provided opportunities for participants to visit environmental and humanitarian projects where the funds they raised were being used. In some instances, participants had the opportunity to spend a day assisting on a community project as volunteers. While participants were recruited through Oxfam Australia, the adventure tour component of the programme was outsourced to a commercial travel service provider who provided a fully packaged programme including airfares, meals, a bicycle and a guide. This component of the experience is almost identical to any packaged adventure-based tour conducted by a wide range of operators globally.

The findings of this study suggest that while the tourist gaze narrative dominated many of the blogs, a significant component of these narratives emphasized the altruistic experiences associated with volunteering, giving back and helping others through fund-raising (Lyons, 2007). The sense of giving was further enhanced when participants visited communities where the monies they had raised were being used. Moreover, the separation of the act of adventure from the act of giving appeared to have little impact upon the participants' experiences as volunteers. This study argued that participants in this new form of volunteer tourism appear very similar to participants in more traditional forms. However, the strong emphasis upon more hedonic pleasures associated with the physical challenges of cycle-touring suggests that altruism remained in the background while on tour but emerged later upon reflection (Lyons, 2007).

This form of volunteer tourism challenges the necessity for the simultaneity of volunteering and touring in volunteer tourism. It raises questions about the act of volunteering and whether it can be experienced more remotely and independently in space and time from the act of touring.

Conclusion: Meta-ambiguities Ahead

The three examples presented in this chapter challenge current views and approaches to volunteer tourism. They illustrate how a narrow treatment of volunteer tourism does not fully capture the realities of the many who are exposed to a multitude of opportunities and challenges that may at once render them classifiable as volunteer tourists, students, package tourists, exchange participants, employees, fund-raisers, or a number of other designations. Rather than trying to pigeonhole characteristics, interests, or behaviours, it is valuable to focus upon how volunteering and tourist behaviours intersect and manifest in a variety of ways.

The remaining chapters extend the ideas presented in this chapter and present case studies that also challenge where we set the boundaries around the phenomenon of volunteer tourism. These chapters consider the overlap between volunteer tourism and other forms of tourism such as cultural and indigenous tourism. They also raise important questions about how we have to-date, framed volunteer tourism as a unidirectional phenomenon where volunteers from developed nations serve the needs of developing nations. The final chapter in this volume revisits a central question that underpins this book regarding the commodification of volunteer tourism. In many ways, this debate about the commodification process is a meta-ambiguity that challenges the way volunteer tourism is framed and understood. In closing this chapter we raise a number of questions about the ambiguities of the decommodified/commodified debate that is currently being played out in volunteer tourism.

An ideological proposition put forward in this volume is that volunteer tourism is a sustainable alternative to mass tourism. While each of the case studies confirm this ideological position of volunteer tourism, a number of these contributions reveal that such an ideology can be usurped and diverted by hegemonic forces of late capitalism. A central question that emerges then is whether a philosophy and practice of volunteer tourism that extends beyond market priorities can be sustained in the global tourism marketplace? Areas such as ecotourism have not been able to resist the global commodification in international tourist markets. Can and should volunteer tourism avoid the same fate? Indeed evidence of a move towards the commodification of volunteer tourism is already at-hand with large tour operators competing for a share of this new market. This raises a number of questions that have yet to be answered in the volunteer tourism literature. Does it matter if volunteer tourism becomes commodified as long as it still provides assistance to various projects and communities? Can a commodified experience of tourism satisfy both the need to consume and the desire to assist others? Will the experience become a tranquillizer rather than an awareness-raising experience that prioritizes escape over giving? Will the communities that volunteer tourists visit become 'consumables' that are made palatable under the guise of a 'legitimate' altruistic activity? As the swift rise in number of commercial operators who offer volunteer tourism products continues, answering these questions become central in understanding the future of volunteer tourism.

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Author Queries:

[AU1]: Australian Bureau Statistics, 1986 is not in the reference list.

[AU2]: Hollinshead, 1998 is not cited in the text.

[AU3]: McGehee and Norman, 2002 is not cited in the text.

[AU4]: Wearing et al., 2005 is not cited in the text.