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Volunteer Tourism: A New Narrative Between Hosts and Guest

Alexandra Coghlan

In suggesting that volunteer tourism is the new avatar of travelism, Stephen Wearing, Simone Grabowski and Jennie Small place volunteer tourism in a suite of *rite of passage* travel experiences for young adults. Drawing on the Grand Tour of the 17th to 19th centuries, Wearing *et al.* posit volunteer tourism as an opportunity for young adults from predominantly Western countries to engage in personal development through cultural education while travelling and volunteering in host communities. Volunteer tourism experiences offer backstage access to immersive experiences, creating deeper and more authentic interactions that facilitate true cultural engagement. In many ways, this form of travelling represents a return to the art of travelism, where travel was not seen as escapism or relaxation, but instead expanded horizons and challenged the traveller to move outside his or her comfort zone. Travelism occurs as individuals mindfully explore new places, seeking out new experiences beyond hedonic self-gratifying pleasures, and with an active interest in local customs and more. Most importantly, the art of travelism develops a more worldly outlook on life for volunteer tourists as they interact with locals. The depth of these interactions, both with local communities and with other like-minded volunteer tourists, are believed to lead to personal reflection, self-transformation, changes in trust, adventurousness, anxiety and depression (Alexander, 2012). A mix of self-focused personal development and benefits for the host community are expected from these volunteer tourism experiences. Indeed, the importance of altruism-related travel motivations and benefits to local communities are underscored as a key point of difference between volunteer tourism and other forms of travel. The role of altruism and the desire to perform a civic service for a global community is arguably the foundations of Wearing *et al.*'s proposition

that volunteer tourism is a form of counter-culture to a 'neoliberal society predicated on finance and celebrity'.

Yet, despite more than a decade of research into volunteer tourism, there remains unresolved questions regarding the value of this sector. Current criticisms of volunteer tourism focus on four areas; an inappropriate adoption of an outdated development paradigm, an increasing trend towards the commercialization of the sector, a sense of role ambiguity arising from conflicting tourist/volunteer roles and finally, questionable long-term positive outcomes of this sector. First, with regards to the sector itself, the use of a Western development paradigm is repeatedly questioned within volunteer tourism. An important conceptual framework on the relationship between international development theory and tourism is presented by Sharpley and Telfer (2002). They relate tourism as an agent of development to the four key development paradigms of modernization; dependency, structuralism, economic neoliberalism and alternative development. Whereas we would like to see volunteer tourism sit within the alternative development paradigm, there have been concerns that the sector is actually moving towards an economic neoliberal paradigm, whereby market forces determine development agendas and successful projects. It is possible that commercial agendas for tourism brokers who recruit volunteer tourists have come to displace well-intentioned original development agendas of philanthropic host organizations to improve the livelihoods of local communities in poor economic circumstances. Furthermore, authors such as Simpson (2004), Guttentag (2009) and Palacios (2010) argue that volunteer tourism experiences may do more towards fostering a 'lucky us' versus 'poor them' position than we like to admit.

Furthermore, many volunteer tourism providers have adopted a commercialization strategy, producing goods and services with the explicit intent of earning a profit. This strategy is not uncommon with the third sector of the economy, who wish to meet more pressing social needs than is possible with existing organizational resources. However, there is a very real risk that in commercializing, volunteer tourism providers may move away from their original mission (Tuckman, 1998 cited in Coghlan & Noakes, 2012). There does appear to be an increase in the number of for-profit organizations, particularly recruitment/sending organizations, within the sector; these organizations offer packages comparable with mainstream conventional mass tourism in terms of both duration and type of work, and requiring new, more sophisticated approaches to marketing and service management to sell these different packages. Moreover, we are witnessing the rise of cross sector partnerships that join non-profit social ventures with for-profit tourism businesses or even mixed-unit operations with both non-profit and for-profit programmes. This commercialization process may affect the balance of altruistic and self-focused marketing used to sell tours to potential volunteer tourists; a number of authors have questioned the balance of altruistic to self-focused travel motivations driving engagement in volunteer tourism

experiences. Reviewing 44 volunteer tourism studies, Coghlan and Fennell (2009) found more evidence of the latter than the former, a finding supported by authors such as Mustonen (2007) or Cousins (2007). If not carefully managed, this consumer attitude towards volunteer tourism may lead to negative impacts upon project outcomes and local benefits, as volunteer tourists struggle to balance volunteering and tourism.

The tension between the altruistic and self-focused aspects of volunteer tourism may also be responsible for the role ambiguity noted by Lyons (2003); many young travellers engaged in volunteer tourism projects find it difficult to reconcile their identities as tourists with their identities as volunteer tourists, leading to instability around the nature of their travel experience. A number of studies have drawn attention to the hybrid character of volunteer tourism, which combines leisure, fun, self-actualization, travel, volunteering and altruism (Brumbaugh, 2010; Coghlan, 2006; Ooi & Laing, 2010; Tomazos & Butler, 2010). Some research also indicates that, perhaps as a result of this hybrid model, volunteer tourists may experience some level of confusion as to their role and identity during their volunteer tourism experience (Lyons, 2003; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Mustonen, 2006). Lyons (2003) was one of the first to point out these tensions in his studies of young Australians volunteering overseas. He identified four simultaneous, ambiguous roles for the participants and concluded that 'the lack of clarity about their roles created frustration and anger that affected the quality of their experience' (Lyons, 2003: 11). Similar findings suggest that where volunteer tourists did not feel useful at the project (i.e. did not have a defined role), disillusionment with the experience was likely to follow (Blackman & Benson, 2010; Zavitz & Butz, 2011). Mustonen (2006) also acknowledges the shifting roles experienced by volunteer tourists, but accepts that this is part of the experience, as 'the roles of (volunteer) tourists are prone to fluctuate between conventional and altruistic tourists' (Mustonen, 2006: 165).

Finally, the issue of local benefits and project outcomes has also been questioned by some researchers (Broad, 2003; Guttentag, 2009; Palacios, 2010). It has been suggested that volunteer tourism offers great learning and transformational opportunities (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Sin, 2009). Yet, no studies have explored the longer-term impacts of volunteer tourism on the participants; we know little about how values, attitudes and behaviours change long-term following a volunteer tourism experience. Certainly, in order for significant travel-related change to occur, the volunteer tourism experience must be carefully designed and facilitated by the tour organizers (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). As personal change can be an emotionally challenging process at odds with the hedonic promises of most tourism marketing, it remains to be seen whether personal change will have a role within an increasingly commercialized form of volunteer tourism. Furthermore, while McGehee and Andereck (2009) suggest that volunteer tourism experiences can lead to a greater sense of agency for returned

volunteer tourists, it is unclear what proportion of volunteer tourists remain active as volunteers in their home communities. On the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that few of these volunteer tourists engage in volunteering activities, even ones similar to that undertaken during their vacation, once home. Further research should be undertaken in the area of long-term benefits from volunteer tourism, both in terms of project outcomes (social, cultural and/or environmental) and impacts on the volunteers themselves.

In light of these criticisms, it must be remembered that volunteer tourism was established on the principles of travelism, creating opportunities and personal development through meaningful travel experiences. Tourists, in particular youth, were expected to learn, thrive and flourish through their volunteering efforts, while local communities and environments would benefit as a result of increased funds, labour, as well as less tangible outcomes around intercultural learning. The promise of volunteer tourism remains strong despite the issues outlined above, and broader travel-related issues and social and environmental changes that may affect the tourism system. It is arguably time to interrogate the value of this sector, and ask how we might retain its positive characteristics? In particular, we want to creatively think of how to provide opportunities for personal development for youth travellers, fostering altruistic values as well as benefitting local communities. In addition, we might want to consider how to shape the future of this sector within a broader context of changing tourism trends. Can we encourage a more local approach to volunteer tourism, borrowing from the principles of soft mobility and slow tourism, to benefit local communities? How might we leverage meaningful travel experiences to build personal wellbeing, encourage returning volunteer tourists to get involved in local volunteer activities and aim to build community resilience through volunteer tourism in the face of major environmental and social challenges? In essence, how might we encourage a return to the lost art of travelism, as advocated by Boorstin (1975) and picked up by Wearing *et al.* in the lead probe.

Any solution to these issues must target at least the following areas. First, the sector must reposition itself with regards to the prevailing development paradigm; is it necessary for volunteer tourism experiences to take place in long-haul, exotic destinations, or would experiences closer to home allow participants the same opportunities to reflect on larger social issues without creating an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic? Do other models exist whereby volunteer tourists might act locally, but have an impact beyond their local region? Second, the sector could reflect on its increasing level of commercialization. Do volunteer tourism providers need to sell scripted experiences that can be bought to provide certain opportunities, or might we allow participants to co-create their own experiences, borrowing from increasingly popular community events, where creativity, playfulness and sense of valuable contribution are highly valued. Third, might we want to consider separating out the volunteering (other-focused)

and tourism (self-focused) elements of volunteer tourism, as suggested by Lyons and Wearing (2008).

An increasingly common model is the 'charity challenge' model, whereby participants volunteer their time and effort to raise funds and awareness for the cause before engaging travel-related activities. Furthermore, can we encourage volunteer tourists to continue being involved in the cause after their volunteer tourism experience? Finally, the very nature of tourism and travel may change in the coming decades as large social, economic and environmental changes occur at regional and international levels. Many destinations and origin regions face issues of environmental uncertainty and degradation (e.g. 'Last Chance Tourism'). Other stressors on our current economic and social fabric have also been predicted; an ageing population and an increase in lifestyle-related diseases, with flow on impacts on our discretionary income and time are some examples. Peak oil predictions and climate mitigation measures may also affect transport systems and travel patterns from relatively cheap long-haul travel. Volunteer tourism will probably not be immune to these changes and will have to adapt to a world where discretionary income has decreased, long-haul travel may be less readily available, and many origin and destination regions face less stable environments.

The big questions remains how we might harness the benefits of volunteer tourism, while overcoming this sector's issues as noted above and keeping volunteer tourism attractive to youth travellers seeking adventure? How do we encourage the personal development of youth, promote a sense of wellbeing, create a greater sense of civic duty and benefit local communities through volunteering and travel? Perhaps eschewing the exotic, long-haul holidays, in favour of a more localized, community-based form of tourism might address many of these issues; volunteer tourists could become involved in local campaigns, driven by local charities, with stronger links within the local communities. Movements such as slow tourism, with an emphasis on soft mobilities, such as cycling and walking, and localized social benefits, may become more mainstream as transport patterns shift and level of discretionary income change. In addition, one major benefit of volunteer tourism is that it seemingly taps into many of the recognized drivers of wellbeing, including doing something meaningful, being active, building relationships with others; volunteer tourism experiences are generally active holidays, requiring a high level of involvement from their participants, in a social environment, working on projects that serve a greater purpose (New Economics Foundation, 2011). Perhaps deliberately linking the development of volunteer tourism to slow travel, wellbeing outcomes and community resilience may represent a pathway for the future development of volunteer tourism.

It is likely that the volunteer tourism sector will undergo changes in the future, perhaps with a more commercial 'volunteer lite' on the one hand, and on the other hand, a slow travel approach with strong ties to local community, an emphasis on wellbeing and continued participant involvement in



campaigns. Lyons and Wearing (2008) have argued that charity challenges provide an attractive alternative to traditional travel by combining the experience of travel with a unique life-time experience while raising funds for charity, thereby 'blending the voluntary act of fund-raising with the more hedonic pleasures of a packaged adventure tour' (Lyons & Wearing, 2008: 151). As well as providing regional tourism development opportunities, charity challenge events also offer a number of benefits to both participants and the associated charities; they offer two major positive outcomes in the form of funds and awareness-raising for charities that organize them as well as physical and mental health benefits for the event participants (Wharf Higgins & Lauzon, 2003). It is suggested that travel experiences, such as charity challenge events, offer opportunities to implement broad-scale strategies to improve wellbeing, e.g. strengthening community action and developing personal skills as set out in the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (World Health Organization, 1986) as a road to increased social sustainability, address important social and environmental causes and boost community resilience. Volunteer tourism researchers moving into alternative research areas, such as charity challenges, may bring with them important lessons for creating a blended volunteer tourism experience that addresses the current issues with this sector while boosting its benefits.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we argued that volunteer tourism has become the new avatar of youth travelism. It represents the ideal of engagement with other cultures, altruism, personal development, community development and global citizenship. In the responses, Alexandra Coghlan points out that it might just reinforce a 'lucky' us versus 'poor', and with a more commercial approach it may create a more mainstream tourism attitude of 'what's in it for me?', going on to suggest we may need to look for different models in the future, Daniel Guttentag criticizes the probes positions suggesting that it may not be a 'new form of rebellion', it could be quintessentially neoliberal and is '... more reminiscent of ordinary, self-interested tourist consumers'. These are all good points and only add to the amorphous boundaries that exist in our attempts to explore this area. It brings to mind the statement in 'Our Common Future', sustainability '... is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs' (WCED, 1987: 9). Kevin Lyons, in his reply, is more circumspect, suggesting positions proffered by Nietzsche and Spencer provide evidence that altruistic ideologies



should not be abandoned, but reviewed to enable a more critical engagement with an alternative paradigm of reciprocity. This falls in line with the more critical turn that has arrived in tourism research and enables Lyons to suggest that altruism is more than part of a duality of altruism versus egotism, but they are integral parts of each other and hence the need to re-evaluate the positions taken. This provides us with critical new directions for future research in this area.

The most rudimentary outcome of the probe has been achieved in that it sort to provide a contribution to the development of a framework for an understanding of volunteer tourism that is subject-centred, and that is dynamic and capable of dealing with the complexity of contemporary tourism and tourist cultures. With the rejoinders this has been achieved, we explore the emerging phenomenon of volunteer tourism and note that important here is the intersection of the past, the present and the future (thanks Daniel), and the real and imagined dimensions of travel and the ways in which new ideologies and technologies are reshaping what it means to travel and to be a traveller. They are fracturing established notions of the real and the imagined and home and away, but Kevin goes further than this and suggests we need to redefine the underlying assumed concepts using altruism as an example. Alexandra reminds us we must go further than this and reminds us that we all need to suggest that it is now necessary to find a new language for talking about the travel space, to reconceptualize the configuration of memory and imagination that constructs the spaces and experiences through, and in, which the traveller self is constituted and exposed. The result, we suggest, is a more nuanced and sophisticated way of understanding contemporary volunteer tourism. Significantly, we argue that the key is not in moving conceptually from understanding foundation themes, but it is to conceptualize travel and the volunteer traveller self simultaneously through the interpretative and sensory 'thirdspace' of both.

Discussion Questions

- (1) What frameworks can we examine that will enable us to explore volunteer tourism from one concerned with a disassociated 'gaze' to emphasise a more engaged set of experiences and imaginings, which incorporate all the senses as well as both the imagined-real of the traveller space?
- (2) How do we understand the subjective realities that are the experiences (imagined or otherwise) of the volunteer traveller-tourist – to

- enable us to delve into what it is that 'they' are looking for when they travel?
- (3) Community participation in tourism development has historically been somewhat problematic and subject to numerous constraints, what appropriate approaches that utilize creative, engaging and educational techniques have the potential to be applied to volunteer tourism?
 - (4) Tourist cultures, and thus the traveller self, are multiple and contradictory, constructed and reconstructed through the negotiation of experience that occurs in the context of tourist space. This understanding of tourism assumes that in the first instance tourism is about engagement. Volunteer tourism has come to be viewed as a process of expanded social interaction whereby self-identity can be enlarged through the intersection of differing places, peoples, cultures and societies. How would 'critical theory' analyse this statement?
 - (5) The most spectacular increase in tourism took place in the last two decades of the 20th century and has made it a 'quintessential feature of mass consumer culture and modern life' (Britton, 1991: 451). Are alternative approaches to travel such as volunteer tourism just a minor nuance of this rather than an alternative direction?

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