

Assessing the Impact and Ethical Considerations of Volunteer Tourism: A Review of Practices, Outcomes, Challenges and Future Directions

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is a multifaceted and evolving form of travel that combines tourism with altruistic endeavors. This chapter explores the intricate dimensions of volunteer tourism: from its historical evolution to its motivations, project types, impacts, challenges, and emerging trends. The historical roots of volunteer tourism can be traced back to the emergence of organized travel and missionary work in the 19th century, evolving into a distinct travel trend that combines exploration with acts of goodwill. Over time it has expanded to encompass a diverse community of participants, motivated by personal growth, cultural exchange, and a desire to contribute to host communities and ecosystems. However, volunteer tourism is not without challenges and criticisms, including concerns about perpetuating stereotypes, commodifying poverty, and ensuring genuine sustainability and benefit to host communities. Emerging trends and innovations are reshaping the volunteer tourism landscape, with technology playing a pivotal role in recruitment, project management, and communication. Virtual volunteering

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and specialized projects cater to evolving traveler preferences, while a renewed focus on transparency and accountability seeks to address criticisms and promote responsible practices.

1. Introduction

Volunteer tourism, colloquially known as voluntourism, represents a dynamic and multifaceted intersection of travel, altruism, and cultural exchange (McGehee & Santos, 2005). In recent years, it has garnered considerable attention, both from enthusiastic advocates who view it as a potent means of effecting positive change and from critics who raise concerns about its ethics, impact, and sustainability (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Lyons & Wearing, 2008). As volunteer tourism continues to grow in popularity, understanding its complex dimensions, assessing its impact on host communities and ecosystems, and unraveling the ethical intricacies surrounding its practice have become imperative (Simpson, 2004; Palacios, 2010). This comprehensive review paper embarks on a journey to explore the diverse landscape of volunteer tourism, examining its historical evolution, its manifold manifestations across the globe, the myriad motivations of participants, the challenges it poses, and the potential it holds as a tool for sustainable development.

Volunteer tourism epitomizes the fusion of travel experiences and altruistic endeavors (McCool & Moisey, 2008). Individuals and groups embark on journeys with a dual purpose: to explore new destinations while simultaneously contributing their time, resources, and skills to various projects, be they community-based, environmental, or educational (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Fennell, 2016). The promise of making a positive impact, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and gaining a deeper appreciation for global issues often motivates volunteer tourist (Brown & Lehto, 2005; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Yet, despite its noble intentions, volunteer tourism has faced significant scrutiny. Critics argue that it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, commodify poverty, and prioritize the needs and desires of volunteers over the genuine welfare of host communities (Lokhorst, 2011; McGehee & Andereck, 2004). These polarized perspectives underscore the pressing need for a nuanced examination of volunteer's tourism effects and ethical dimensions.

The roots of the recently noticed volunteer tourism trend date back to the 19th century, after the emergence of organized travel and missionary work. This article explores the complex dimensions of volunteer tourism: from its historical development to its motivations, project types, impacts, challenges and emerging trends. Concerns about volunteer tourism, the perpetuation

of stereotypes, the commodification of poverty, and the delivery of true sustainability and benefits to host communities are also examined.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical Evolution of Volunteer Tourism

The historical evolution of volunteer tourism can be traced back to the emergence of organized travel and missionary work in the 19th century. During this period, individuals, often driven by religious motives, embarked on journeys to distant lands to offer assistance and support to communities in need (Brown & Morrison, 2003). These early endeavors laid the foundation for what would eventually become a distinct form of travel that combines tourism with altruistic endeavors. It is essential to recognize the profound influence of missionary and humanitarian movements in shaping the ethos of volunteer tourism and fostering a sense of global responsibility among travelers (McCool & Moisey, 2008).

The 20th century witnessed significant developments in volunteer tourism, particularly in the aftermath of major global conflicts and humanitarian crises. Programs such as the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and the Peace Corps emerged, offering opportunities for individuals to engage in international volunteer service (Simpson, 2004). These initiatives not only provided a structured framework for volunteer work but also contributed to the internationalization of volunteerism. As travel became more accessible and affordable, a growing number of individuals sought to combine their wanderlust with a desire to make a positive impact on the destinations they visited (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

In recent decades, the advent of the internet and social media has transformed the landscape of volunteer tourism. Online platforms and organizations have made it easier for individuals to connect with volunteer opportunities worldwide, promoting a democratization of volunteer tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Additionally, the shift towards more experiential and meaningful travel experiences has fueled the popularity of volunteer tourism, with travelers seeking immersive encounters with local cultures and a deeper sense of purpose in their journeys (Brown & Tisdell, 2018). This historical evolution underscores the intricate interplay between tourism, philanthropy, and the changing motivations of travelers in the development of volunteer tourism as we know it today.

2.2. Motivations and Demographics of Volunteer Tourists

Understanding the motivations and demographics of volunteer tourists is essential for comprehending the diverse array of individuals who engage in volunteer tourism and the driving forces behind their participation. Research has identified a spectrum of motivations that inspire individuals to embark on volunteer tourism experiences. While these motivations can be multifaceted and deeply personal, common themes emerge. A study by Brown and Tisdell (2018) suggests that a primary motivation is a desire for personal growth and self-development. Many volunteer tourists seek to challenge themselves, gain new perspectives, and develop a greater sense of empathy and cultural understanding through their experiences.

Demographically, the volunteer tourism community is notably diverse. Researchers have found that volunteer tourists come from a wide range of age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographic locations (Brown & Lehto, 2005). Age, in particular, plays a significant role in volunteer tourism participation. McGehee and Andereck (2004) note that while younger individuals often engage in volunteer tourism during gap years or breaks from education, older adults may participate upon retirement, seeking purposeful travel experiences. This diversity in age demographics contributes to the richness and variety of perspectives brought to volunteer tourism projects.

Motivations for volunteer tourism also encompass a desire to contribute positively to host communities. Volunteer tourists frequently express a commitment to making a meaningful impact, whether through education, healthcare, environmental conservation, or community development projects (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that motivations can vary significantly among participants. While some may be primarily driven by altruism and a sense of social responsibility, others may view volunteer tourism as an opportunity to enhance their resumes or as a form of adventure tourism (Palacios, 2010).

In conclusion, the motivations and demographics of volunteer tourists are multifaceted and diverse. While personal growth and self-development are common motivations, the volunteer tourism community spans various age groups and backgrounds, each bringing their unique perspectives and reasons for participating. Understanding these motivations and demographics is crucial for program organizers, as it enables them to tailor experiences that align with the preferences and expectations of volunteer tourists, ultimately enhancing the overall impact and satisfaction of volunteer tourism initiatives.

2.3. Types of Volunteer Tourism Projects

Volunteer tourism encompasses a wide array of project types, each with its unique focus and goals. These projects can broadly be categorized into several key areas. Community-based projects are among the most prevalent in volunteer tourism (Brown & Morrison, 2003). These initiatives often involve volunteers working alongside local communities to address pressing social issues. Examples include teaching in local schools, building infrastructure, providing healthcare services, or assisting in community development projects. Community-based volunteer tourism projects aim to empower local communities and improve their well-being through the contributions of volunteers.

Environmental conservation and wildlife protection projects are another prominent category of volunteer tourism experiences (Brown & Tisdell, 2018). These projects typically involve volunteers in activities such as habitat restoration, wildlife monitoring, and conservation efforts. Participants often work alongside environmental organizations and researchers to contribute to the preservation of delicate ecosystems and endangered species. The appeal of such projects lies in the opportunity for volunteers to directly engage with nature and make a tangible impact on environmental sustainability (Fennell, 2016).

In addition to community-based and environmental projects, volunteer tourism extends to disaster relief and humanitarian aid initiatives (McCool & Moisey, 2008). In the aftermath of natural disasters or humanitarian crises, volunteer tourists may join relief efforts to provide immediate assistance, including food distribution, medical aid, and shelter construction. These projects require volunteers to respond swiftly to urgent needs, often in challenging and high-stress environments. Engaging in disaster relief and humanitarian aid allows volunteer tourist to play a critical role in helping communities recover and rebuild (Simpson, 2004).

To summarize, volunteer tourism projects span a wide spectrum, including community-based initiatives, environmental conservation and wildlife protection projects, as well as disaster relief and humanitarian aid efforts. Each project type offers unique opportunities for volunteers to contribute their skills and resources while experiencing different aspects of travel and cultural exchange. The diversity of project options within volunteer tourism allows individuals to align their interests, skills, and passions with projects that resonate with their personal motivations and values.

2.4. The Volunteer Tourist Experience

The volunteer tourist experience is a multifaceted and often transformative journey that encompasses various dimensions, including personal growth, cultural exchange, and immersive engagement. One of the central elements of the volunteer tourist experience is the opportunity for personal development and self-discovery (Brown & Lehto, 2005). Volunteer tourists frequently report significant personal growth during their journeys, characterized by increased self-confidence, expanded intercultural awareness, and the development of new skills (Brown & Morrison, 2003). Engaging in volunteer work in unfamiliar environments challenges volunteers to step out of their comfort zones and adapt to new cultural norms and contexts, fostering personal resilience and adaptability (Lyons & Wearing, 2008).

Cultural exchange is another integral aspect of the volunteer tourist experience. As volunteers immerse themselves in host communities, they have the chance to engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions (McCool & Moisey, 2008). This exchange of ideas, customs, and perspectives not only enriches the volunteers' understanding of the world but also promotes mutual respect and intercultural dialogue (McGehee & Santos, 2005). The relationships formed between volunteers and local residents can lead to lasting connections and a deeper appreciation of global diversity (Brown & Tisdell, 2018).

Volunteer tourists often report a sense of fulfillment and purpose derived from their contributions to the host community or project (Simpson, 2004). This intrinsic satisfaction stems from the tangible impact volunteers make, whether through teaching, building, or environmental conservation efforts (Palacios, 2010). Such experiences can instill a long-lasting sense of social responsibility and a commitment to sustainable and responsible travel (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

2.5. Emerging Trends and Innovations in Volunteer Tourism

Volunteer tourism, like other forms of travel, is not immune to the evolving landscape of tourism and technology. Several emerging trends and innovations have shaped the practice of volunteer tourism in recent years, offering new opportunities and challenges.

One notable trend is the integration of technology into the volunteer tourism experience. As travelers become more digitally connected, volunteer tourism organizations have embraced technology to streamline volunteer recruitment, project management, and communication (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Online platforms and mobile apps allow volunteers to research and

sign up for projects, while organizations can efficiently coordinate volunteer placements and collect feedback. However, the digitalization of volunteer tourism also raises concerns about the commodification of volunteer work and the potential for superficial engagements (Fennell, 2016).

Virtual volunteering, sometimes referred to as volunteering from home, has gained traction as a response to global events and crises (Stone, 2012). This innovative approach enables volunteers to contribute their time and skills remotely, bypassing the need for physical travel (Brown & Tisdell, 2018). Virtual volunteering opportunities range from online tutoring to virtual fundraising campaigns, allowing individuals to make a positive impact from the comfort of their own homes. While virtual volunteering offers increased accessibility and convenience, it also challenges traditional notions of volunteer tourism, raising questions about the authenticity of the volunteer experience and its connection to the host community.

Another emerging trend is the diversification of volunteer tourism offerings to cater to niche interests and causes (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Volunteer tourists can now choose from a wide range of specialized projects, such as sustainable agriculture, marine conservation, or social entrepreneurship. This trend aligns with the growing demand for more customized and purpose-driven travel experiences, allowing volunteers to align their interests and passions with their volunteer work (McCool & Moisey, 2008). However, it also presents challenges related to project management, as organizations must tailor their offerings to meet the unique needs of each niche.

In recent years, there has been a shift towards greater transparency and accountability in volunteer tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). Responsible volunteer tourism organizations are placing a stronger emphasis on impact assessment and the ethical considerations of their programs (McCool & Moisey, 2008). This trend includes increased engagement with host communities and stakeholders in the planning and evaluation of volunteer projects. It also involves a focus on long-term sustainability and fostering genuine partnerships between volunteers and host organizations (Brown & Tisdell, 2018).

3. Methodology

This research has been conducted with a qualitative design to reveal the determinants and current situation of volunteer tourism. Data have been obtained by scanning secondary sources. In this regard, scientific publications, journal articles, corporate reports and tourism publications on the subject have been examined. Bal (2016) refers to the systematic

examination of interviews, notes, written or visual documents as content analysis. In this sense, the data have been subjected to content analysis by making comprehensive inferences in this study. The reason why content analysis is preferred is to obtain a broad perspective on volunteer tourism based on secondary sources. The specific research questions (RQ) are as follows:

RQ1: What difficulties are there in the development of volunteer tourism?

RQ2: How can the growth of volunteer tourism be achieved?

RQ3: What should be done to make volunteer tourism sustainable?

4. General Evaluation

As for evaluation to RQ1 and RQ2

Despite its noble intentions, volunteer tourism faces several challenges and criticisms that have come to the forefront in recent years. These can be considered as obstacles to the development of volunteer tourism. One of the primary criticisms revolves around the potential for volunteer tourism to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and commodify poverty (Lokhorst, 2011). Critics argue that volunteer tourism may inadvertently portray host communities as helpless or dependent on foreign assistance, reinforcing unequal power dynamics (McGehee & Andereck, 2004). Additionally, some contend that the short-term nature of many volunteer tourism experiences can lead to superficial engagements, preventing volunteers from truly understanding the root causes of the issues they aim to address (Simpson, 2004). These critiques emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and responsible practices in volunteer tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008).

Another challenge lies in ensuring that volunteer tourism initiatives are truly sustainable and beneficial to host communities (McCool & Moisey, 2008). Some projects may prioritize the desires and preferences of volunteers over the long-term needs of the community (Brown & Tisdell, 2018). For example, building infrastructure that is not locally maintained or staffed can result in projects that have limited long-term impact (McCool & Moisey, 2008). Striking a balance between volunteer satisfaction and the genuine welfare of host communities remains a significant challenge in volunteer tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

Furthermore, there is ongoing debate about the actual impact of volunteer tourism on host communities and environments. While many volunteers are motivated by the desire to make a positive difference, measuring the tangible benefits can be complex (Brown & Morrison, 2003). Impact assessment

in volunteer tourism often relies on qualitative data, making it challenging to quantify and compare outcomes across different projects (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). These challenges underscore the need for standardized evaluation methods and a commitment to transparent reporting of outcomes (McCool & Moisey, 2008).

As for evaluation to RQ3

Volunteer tourism is a complex and evolving field that encapsulates the evolving dynamics of travel, philanthropy, and global interconnectedness. While it holds immense potential for positive change and personal transformation, it demands a nuanced and responsible approach. To harness the benefits of volunteer tourism while mitigating its pitfalls, stakeholders must continue to engage in critical discussions, implement best practices, and adapt to the evolving needs and expectations of volunteers and host communities alike. Getz & Timur's (2012) view that the integrated work of all stakeholders can produce success in the sustainability goals of the destination seems correct. Therefore, taking into account the opinions of destination people and public opinion managers will contribute to the sustainability of volunteer tourism (Lee & Zhang, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Volunteer tourism represents a dynamic and evolving intersection of travel, altruism, and cultural exchange. This comprehensive review has journeyed through the various facets of volunteer tourism, from its historical evolution to its motivations, project types, impacts, challenges, and emerging trends. It is evident that volunteer tourism is a practice that both inspires and perplexes, offering the promise of positive change while raising significant ethical and practical questions. The historical evolution of volunteer tourism reveals its roots in missionary and humanitarian work, evolving into a distinct form of travel that combines exploration with altruism. Over time, volunteer tourism has expanded and diversified, mirroring broader trends in the travel industry. Today, individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds engage in volunteer tourism, seeking personal growth, cross-cultural exchange, and opportunities to contribute to host communities and ecosystems.

Motivations for volunteer tourism are as varied as the individuals who participate. Personal development, cultural immersion, and a desire to make a positive impact are among the primary drivers. Emerging trends and innovations in volunteer tourism offer both opportunities and complexities. Technology has reshaped the landscape, providing platforms for recruitment, communication, and project management. Virtual volunteering and

specialized projects cater to changing traveler preferences, while a renewed focus on transparency and accountability seeks to address criticisms and promote responsible practices.

Volunteer tourism, which initially brought together local communities, is today associated with international conservation and community projects (Balderas-Cejudo & Patterson, 2023). This evolution indicates the need for more research on volunteer tourism. In particular, as Sin (2009) mentioned, the literature can be enriched with the perspectives of aid recipients. It is a meaningful research area in terms of testing the difficulties that arise between tourists and the people of the destination. In addition, addressing the issue from the perspective of different generations will also contribute to the development of the volunteer tourism perspective. Because in order for volunteer tourism to be successful, it is necessary not only to ensure the sustainability of the destinations but also to ensure that the intentions of the tourists are not commoditized (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). In this context, determining the behavioral boundaries and social support levels of tourist clusters in different generations is an important approach.

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