

# Is volunteer tourism defeating the point tourism essay



Volunteer tourism is described as the "modern phenomenon of travelling overseas as a volunteer" (Guttentag 2009: 538), which is exactly what I did in March of 2010. Eleven senior students from my secondary school were chosen to partake in a humanitarian mission trip to the Dominican Republic. We, along with our school chaplain and two teachers, worked with a local organization called "Asociación para el Desarrollo de San José de Ocoa, Inc." (ADESJO), and they sent us on a two hour trip up a bumpy and steep mountain to the village of El Cercado. For two weeks we worked on building ten latrines in the village while getting to know the villagers and making friendships and memories that we would carry with us for the rest of our lives. There is no doubt that as a volunteer tourist I took away a great deal from this trip, but I have begun to wonder what impact volunteer tourism has on host communities and the world at large. After researching the topic of "volunteer tourism" I have come to discover that most of the benefits of volunteer tourism are felt by the volunteers themselves and not the host communities and their members. In the area of "Global Development Studies" this reflects the influence that the Global North has upon the Global South. Even though volunteer tourism is veiled by altruistic intentions, any positive effects could potentially lead to extremely negative effects in the global spectrum. Unsatisfactory work is being done by unskilled volunteers, cross-cultural misunderstanding and cultural stereotypes are being increased and reinforced, and neo-colonialism and capitalism are being supported. This paper will argue that volunteer tourism is more beneficial for the volunteers themselves, while in reality it has negative effects on the locals in host communities.

While there are potentially macro scaled negative effects of volunteer tourism, it is important to analyse the initial micro negative effects that lead to these larger negative effects. The first and most important of these micro effects is that unsatisfactory work is being done by unskilled volunteers, while the needs of locals are put aside to focus on the experiences of the volunteers. In recent years volunteer tourism has become very popular, especially among post-secondary students (Bailey and Russel 2010 : 353), automatically one is left to question the level of experience these students have in the areas such as infrastructure, education, or environmental conservation. Daniel A. Guttentag (2009) points out that there is a hindrance in " work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work, caused by volunteers' lack of skills;" (537) and there is even a " decrease in employment opportunities" (ibid.). It is evident that a great number of volunteer tourists lack certain skills which is undoubtedly due to the fact that they ".. do not have enough knowledge, reflection capacity, appropriate skills or qualifications, volunteering and international experience, time to get involved with the locals or altruistic intentions" (Palacios 2010: 2). Despite these facts the volunteers experiences are still focused upon.

Organizations that plan volunteer tourist trips focus on making the experience of the volunteer tourists trip as enjoyable and safe as possible and work around the needs and desires of the volunteers (Guttentag 2009: 539). Even though some would argue that organization choose volunteers carefully and train them beforehand (Tomazos and Butler 2009: 13), this cannot be generalized to all organizations. When the needs and desires of the locals are being ignored in order to service volunteers this negatively

affects the lives of the locals in the host communities for they are the people that must endure the potentially poor work done by the volunteers.

Volunteer tourists are described as "'experiential' or 'experimental'" (Bailey and Russell 2010: 3), and those two words automatically imply the word "different". Volunteer tourists want to experience a different culture in order to grow and re-evaluate who they themselves are as a person (ibid.). Once again the volunteer is experiencing a benefit, but one is left to question what preconceived notion the volunteer has of the culture he or she is entering in to.

Another issue that arises with volunteer tourism is that volunteer tourists that arrive in host communities in the Global South with stereotypical ideas increase and reinforce cultural stereotypes and cross-cultural misunderstanding (Raymond and Hall 2008: 1). The preconceived notions of the volunteer tourists risk being stereotypical ideas of an impoverished and hungry family living in a shack, which creates a separation between themselves and the locals they come in contact with. If that separation is never bridged, or if the volunteer never gains a true knowledge of the culture because they are too focused on helping the stereotypical "other", it creates and enforces cultural stereotype, especially because volunteer tourists may assume "that host communities accept their poverty" (Raymond and Hall 2008: 2). If there is a lack of communication between the volunteers and the members of the host community then the volunteer gains little to no true experience with the culture they are experiencing, which can actually "negatively impact the host culture" (Guttentag 2009: 547). This

problem is partly due to how the cultures are being portrayed by organizations.

Reflecting true Eurocentric ideals (the notion that the "correct" way of living is the Western way and all other ways are exotic and irregular), organizations tend to portray volunteer tourist destinations in a way that will attract the volunteer tourists to participate in these excursions. A "gap year" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a period of time (usually an academic year) taken by a student as a break from formal education, typically between leaving school and starting a university or college course, and often spent travelling or working" (2010). There are organizations that specifically service these gap year students, but they are criticized for:

[Imposing] a simplistic view of 'the other' so that 'difference' can be sold and consumed. This occurs through the use of sweeping generalisations of destination communities in promotional materials and continues throughout the VTP [Volunteer Tourist Programs] due to lack of critical engagement with the experience. (Raymond and Hall 2008: 3)

This "simplistic" view is meant to enhance the difference between the volunteer tourists and the locals of the host community in order to enhance the volunteer's experience, but this is detrimental because it only reinforces Third World stereotypes and has "the potential for romanticisation of the 'other' stereotype" (Matthews qtd. In Ooi and Lang 2010: 3). Once again, the volunteers are benefiting from their experience as volunteer tourists, but it comes at the cost of the people of the Global South who must endure further victimization and stereotypes that create the idea that they must be saved

by the Global North because " the inequalities between the developed and developing worlds [are highlighted]" (Simpson qtd. In Ooi and Land 2010: 3). These inequalities reflect global capitalism and neo-colonialism.

Poor work quality and issues of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the reinforcement of stereotypes all in the name of " the volunteer tourist experience" leads to macro-scaled problems of neo-colonialism and the support of capitalism. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neo-colonialism as " the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence another country; especially the retention of such influence over a developing country by a former colonial power" (2010), and, broadly defined, capitalism is " a system having accumulation at its core" (Lippit 2007: 179). Volunteer tourism is a new way of exploiting the Global South for the gain of the Global North because, as previously mentioned, the needs of the volunteers are focused on despite the fact that poor quality work is being done and it reinforces the notion of " the other" in order for the volunteer tourists to gain personal experience. Volunteer tourist trips support the notion of " the other" and "'reinforce power inequalities' and thus represent 'a form of neo-colonialism or imperialism' with respect to developing nations" (Raymond and Hall qtd. In Ooi and Laing 2010: 3). These power inequalities reflect capitalism because it puts the Global South at the bottom of global hierarchy, where they are used in order for those in higher positions - the Global North - to accumulate money and in this case, to accumulate global experience.

This global experience is being gained at the cost of creating a gap between the North and the South in terms of advancement in technology and power, <https://assignbuster.com/is-volunteer-tourism-defeating-the-point-tourism-essay/>

further supporting capitalism. This is reflected in what Guttentag (2009) has termed as "the demonstration effect," a term that signifies how a "host culture is impacted when tourists draw attention to their lifestyles and items of wealth" (11) which leads to the possibility of locals trying to "imitate the tourists' consumption patterns, and discontent can emerge when these items of wealth are beyond the reach of a host community" (ibid.). When attention is drawn to what the volunteer tourists from the Global North have and what the locals of the Global South do not have, it also draws attention to the amount of power and wealth that their home countries possess on a global scale. Even now, organizations are aiming to "attract the privileged volunteer tourists" (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 187), which only increases the gap between the developed and the underdeveloped, the rich and the poor, capitalism and equality.

This inequality between these two worlds has a long history of colonialism, and although that ended - after centuries of suffering and exploitation - volunteer tourism is arguably a new form of colonialism. Volunteer tourism "could possibly degenerate into a 'voyeuristic' exploitation of the 'cultural other' that masquerades as academic sanctioned 'servant leadership'" (Butin qtd. In Sin 2009: 484). The Global North displays altruistic intentions of helping the people of the Global South, while in reality they are exploiting them for their own personal gain which is to train youth to become more socially aware and active, but this only leads to further dependence of the South on the North to repair their problems and ease their hardships. The North remains at the top of the global hierarchy:

The basic conclusions of many authors that have contributed to this critical theory of development is that the Western intention of helping underlying the development aid goal as humanitarian as much a colonialist. However, it tends to reproduce the same global patterns of inequality and poverty.

Leaving intact - if not reinforcing - the dominant position of the North.

(Escobar et al. qtd. In Palacios 2010: 4)

Neo-colonialism, the new form of colonialism, defeats the purposes of all of the fighting that occurred in to end colonialism, while once again the Global South faces the negative consequences of being exploited by the Global North through volunteer tourism.

Despite the macro- scaled negative effects that volunteer tourism has the potential of causing, many defend its benefits. Volunteer tourism can "enhance civic-related knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours, improve interpersonal skills and emotional regulation, and contribute to better academic performance and meaning in life" (Billig et al. qtd. In Bailey and Russell 2010: 3). Also argued is that:

... the volunteer tourism experience is a direct interactive experience that causes value change and changed consciousness in the individual which will subsequently influence their lifestyle, while providing forms of community development that are required by local communities. (Wearing 2001: 2)

Unfortunately, it is evident here that the focus is primarily upon what the volunteer tourists gain from the experience, not the locals of the host communities. These benefits are indeed positive, but mostly for the

volunteers and the country that they come from. It is arguable that when the <https://assignbuster.com/is-volunteer-tourism-defeating-the-point-tourism-essay/>



volunteer tourists gain more awareness about these social issues and gain more of a feeling or a desire to make a difference then this will lead to them making a difference in the Global South. However, this is not completely positive because it aids in making the Global South dependent on the Global North. This also reinforces the stereotype of an impoverished and disease-stricken Global South that is doomed unless they are saved by the hero that the Global North has been portrayed as. There is still the argument that "volunteer tourism appears able to offer [an] alternative direction where profit objects are secondary to more altruistic desire to travel in order to assist communities" (Wearing 2001: 12) , but this can be an example of the desire for profit being hidden under a veil of altruism - there truly is no way knowing whether or not the intentions of volunteer tourists are purely altruistic or driven by egoistic ambitions.

Despite the many negative issues that volunteer tourism brings into light, there are attempts to minimise them. Firstly, problems concerning poor work quality done by inexperienced volunteers are being addressed by organizations that offer training to their volunteers that must go through a difficult selection program to begin with (Tomazos and Butler 2009: 13). Organizations are also attempting to involve locals in the host communities as much as possible in the work that volunteer tourists are doing, which creates more employment and helps the locals continue with the projects after the volunteers leave (ibid.). Secondly, in an attempt to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding and the reinforcement of stereotypes, more and more organizations " encourage their volunteers to be culturally sensitive and learn from their experience creating understanding and tolerance for

other people and cultures" (ibid.). Finally, there is a strong desire and attempts to make volunteer tourism beneficial in a way that it teaches others to travel responsibly, especially in regards to the environment, through what has been termed as " justice tourism" and " solidarity tours" (Lyons and Wearing 2008: 187) . These forms of tourism aim to " move tourists to engage with the lived reality of the locals and to establish interactions based on equity and respect" (ibid.). Evidently, there is an attempt to foster more positive effects of volunteer tourism in order to better serve both the volunteers and the locals.

To conclude, volunteer tourism is portrayed as being driven by altruistic intentions, however it is evident that the volunteer tourists themselves experience more benefits than do the locals of the host communities. This issue must be addressed because it emphasizes the long standing notion that the North is the only hope of the South in order to be saved from poverty, disease, environmental crises, and even debt, which is actually the exact opposite of what so many theories in this course have implied. The negative consequences of volunteer tourism questions the intentions of volunteers and the organizations that send them, and also questions the intentions of transnational corporations and governments that have come to form global capitalism. Is the intention specifically to always keep the Global South at the bottom of the global hierarchy in order to reap the benefits of the cheap resources that continue to flow from those areas in order to service the lives of the wealthy North? This question can be argued to no end, but there is no answer as straight forward as the fact that even in volunteer tourism the needs of the Global North are put ahead of those in

the Global South, while the Global South continues to suffer on too many levels.