

Volunteer tourism as development?

Assessing the role of non-government organisations through case studies from Asia

by

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is a relatively recent tourism phenomenon that provides individuals with opportunities to volunteer their labour or services as part of their holiday. The slogans used to sell volunteer tourism promise an opportunity for individuals to engage directly with local communities in order to 'make a difference' to people's lives. There is an implicit message that volunteer tourism contributes towards development. The marketing slogans, however, simplify the complex issue of development into something where people can 'feel good' by 'doing good'.

The portrayal of volunteer tourism in the literature is also overwhelmingly positive, based largely on anecdotal evidence or the volunteer tourist perspective. Furthermore, volunteer tourism is predominantly recognised as an unmediated 'authentic' engagement between host and volunteer tourist. There is limited acknowledgement of the complicated web of stakeholders involved in the phenomenon, or that volunteer tourism is a mediated process. This thesis seeks to rectify this anomaly by testing the simplistic portrayal of volunteer tourism and shifting the focus onto the neglected volunteer tourism stakeholder, that is, the local non-government organisation (NGO) which acts as the conduit between host and volunteer tourist. To accomplish this, the thesis places volunteer tourism within a development framework and examines: first, the influences that have legitimised volunteer tourism as a worthy 'helping' activity, and, second, the perspective of the local development NGO, a vital facilitator of the volunteer tourism experience.

Unravelling the historical legacies of colonial practice and the post-World War II era reveals how the beliefs of today's volunteer tourists have been shaped by the past. The impacts of globalisation further influence the actions of, and the decisions made by, the various volunteer tourism stakeholders. Volunteer tourism, placed within historical and globalised contexts, reveals a more

complex picture than the simplified version sold to potential volunteer tourists. This thesis contends that a cumulation of influences has popularised development, and this, in turn, has changed the way development is viewed today. Development is now secured by volunteer tourism as an unskilled activity where good intentions, rather than skills and experience, are what matter.

In 2010 I undertook field research in India and Nepal with the aim of giving agency to the local development NGO and understanding its position in volunteer tourism. Inquiry utilised a critical theory paradigm through case studies as the means of unravelling the complexities in volunteer tourism relationships. Significantly, research findings reveal that tensions exist within the complex web of relationships. In particular, as conduit between local communities and volunteer tourists, local NGOs are placed in a challenging position as they attempt to balance volunteer tourist needs, local community development needs and organisational needs. As a result, many of the transformative outcomes promised in the volunteer tourism marketing and scholarship fall short of expectations.

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Dedicated to Gary Robert Ingram ≈ 2 March 1967 – 4 December 2011

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