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Voluntourism and the Sustainable Development Goals

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism or voluntourism has become an extremely popular form of tourism as well as attracting significant and growing academic attention (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). In 2001 Wearing defined volunteer tourism (drawing on his own research in community based ecotourism and volunteer tourism in Costa Rica) as: “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve 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, 2001:1). The significant growth in academic interest in the topic is reflected in a web of science search for volunteer tourism peer reviewed literature which counts 1 for 2001, 4 for 2008, 15 for 2013 and 41 for 2016 and the publication of a review paper in the leading journal *Tourism Management* (Wearing & McGehee, 2013) and several journal special issues.

As research on this topic has matured, there has been a conceptual shift from early studies, which have focused on the experience of the individual volunteer to a more critical approach, which questions the impact of the tourists’ activities on the host community (Loiseau et al., 2016b; Lupoli et al., 2014). The vast majority of studies have examined international volunteering, with predominantly white western tourists travelling to low income countries, however there has been some interest in domestic voluntourism. The maturing of research on this topic, which has reconceptualised volunteer tourism as “taking many forms, occurring on an increasingly broad continuum” (McGehee, 2014: 206) and as a part of a tourist’s overall trip, has mirrored the growing market for volunteer tourism holidays.

While significant and growing, the global market for voluntourism is hard to quantify, in part due to the diversity of not-for-profit and commercial providers and projects. Tomazos and Butler (2009) tracked a nearly 500% growth from

2003 to 2007 in projects and countries where these projects were available and provide some evidence of the enormous expansion in this niche area, alongside the publication of a Lonely Planet guide which has run to three editions (Holmes, 2014b). A 2008 report suggested there were at least 1.6 million volunteer tourists who contributed more than \$1.76 billion toward the global economy (European Association for Tourism and Leisure Education & Tourism Research and Marketing, 2008).

There is a significant division in the academic literature on this phenomenon between tourism researchers, who focus on volunteer tourism as a form of tourism and not-for-profit studies that examine this as a form of volunteering (Holmes, 2014). Both approaches are rarely brought together, with each favouring different research questions, methods and outlets for dissemination. In contrast to the increasing attention that tourism academics have given to volunteer tourism, there has been substantially less interest from not-for-profit researchers on 'international voluntary service', as it is frequently termed. International voluntary service has generally had a stronger focus on development outcomes and hence has also been termed 'volunteering for development' to capture this focus as well as open up space for the consideration of the interface and synergies between international and national volunteers. Research in this area has increased significantly in the last 10 years but still nothing to the extent of growth of volunteer tourism research. Such 'different research worlds' with much common ground were discussed in some detail in a 2017 paper (Devereux et al., 2017a) that encouraged the promotion of a global research agenda and utilising the United Nations Plan of Action for integrating volunteerism into the implementation of Agenda 2030 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015a).

This chapter begins by reviewing how voluntourism practice and research has evolved over the past nearly two decades. Next, it identifies the potential relationships between voluntourism and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Following on from this analysis, the chapter considers how voluntourism can contribute to achieving the SDGs, identifying collaborative opportunities for voluntourism practice to support long term sustainable development both in low, middle and high income countries.

The evolution of voluntourism practice and research

The contribution of international volunteers to 'making a difference' has become increasingly controversial over the last 15-20 years. Initial positive commentary from participants and commentators, and in academic publications (Davis Smith et al., 2005; Devereux, 2008) were gradually overwhelmed by more mixed and negative views (Handy et al., 2010; Loiseau et al., 2016a; Perold et al., 2013) regarding the potential effects of mostly white western tourists visiting

low income countries often for short periods of time. These studies rarely differentiated between different types of volunteer placements from short term to long term, skilled or unskilled or any attention to who facilitated the volunteer experience, whether this was an NGO, university, government or commercial enterprise (Holmes, 2014a).

Over 15 years ago the book *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that make a difference* (Wearing, 2001) provided an early theoretical – and positive - rationale for the phenomenon, which focused on the experience for the volunteers. In contrast, Simpson (2004) highlighted the importance of a pedagogy of social justice in volunteer tourism to avoid or mitigate the negative consequences of unprepared or inappropriate international volunteer contributions in fragile development contexts. She suggested such a pedagogy would require explicit attention to why global differences, including injustice, exist and how the lives of people in different places intersect positively or negatively. These would form the basis of critical thinking and engagement beyond simplistic stereotypes. Since the early 2000s a less common treatment of international volunteering gained ground as a form of long term development rather than form of tourism. On the basis of field research findings this highlighted the distinctive contribution of skilled volunteers who live under local conditions for extended periods (Devereux, 2008, 2010; Howard & Burns, 2015; Lough et al., 2016). This latter approach suggested that skilled long term volunteering provides a collaborative and relational approach to international development. This was seen as a distinctive approach compared to conventional approaches to aid and development. Conventional development approaches had mixed success because they relied more on technical and financial solutions and less on the essential soft skills and cross cultural understanding and relationships of development workers with local communities (Liburd & Edwards, 2018; Morgan, 2002; Wilson, 2007).

The critique of voluntourism has identified problems with both the practice and organisation of this phenomenon (Guttentag, 2009). This critical discourse has led to the establishment of various industry codes of conduct as well as campaigns to eradicate particularly problematic forms of voluntourism such as orphanage tourism (Holmes, 2014a) and has led to the development of frameworks within both development and tourism contexts for evaluating impacts of this practice (Sherraden et al. 2008; Taplin et al., 2014; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). For instance, in Australia, a 'Smart Volunteering Campaign' aims to discourage Australians from doing short term, unskilled volunteering within orphanages overseas, with guidelines for being a 'child safe volunteer'. These emphasise three elements: 1. Avoid short-term, unskilled volunteering in orphanages; 2. Avoid activities where children are promoted as tourist attractions; and 3. Do your homework to ensure your local community impact is positive (Bishop & Birmingham, 2018).