

City Slicker to Roo Carer: The Journey of a Wildlife Voluntourist

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Abstract

The level of interest and participation in voluntourism has progressively become a major sector in contemporary tourism. The notion of combining a novel and pleasurable tourism experience with the fulfillment of contributing a worthwhile cause whilst on vacation has drawn voluntourists towards a myriad of volunteer tourism programs and sites around the world. This study investigates the profile of wildlife voluntourists, based on the dimensions of volunteerism habits and experiences, volunteer activity and site selection criteria, pre-trip preparations and expectations, evaluation of satisfaction, depth of transformative learning and experience. Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary in Boyup Brook, Western Australia and its international volunteers were the focus-population utilized in this study. The study revealed several key issues and dimensions of wildlife voluntourism that were prevalent yet divergent from other studies on voluntourism. In particular, the discussion focuses on elements and constituents conducive to transformative learning and suggests an enhanced conceptual model of transformative learning that may be applied for future research and suggestions for more effectual learning outcomes and experiences for volunteers.

Introduction

The level of participation and degree of interest for volunteer tourism has been growing and is projected to continue so (Bailey & Fernando, 2011; Barbieri, Santos & Katsube, 2012; Wearing, 2001). Historically associated with social welfare, volunteers today are central to an extensive range of social-cultural, scientific and environmental endeavors (Coghlan & Gooch, 2012; McGehee, 2012). Along with this trend has sprung a myriad of non-government organizations (NGOs), tourism operators and service providers who have developed such 'give-back getaways' targeted at volunteer tourists or 'voluntourists' who want the chance to 'experience vacations that go beyond just tourist attractions and sightseeing' (Donaldson, 2011, p.28; Villano, 2009). The following paragraph from the opening chapter of Lonely Planet's (2007) book, *'Volunteer: a traveler's guide to making a difference'* gives a glimpse into the tenets of many such give-back getaways:

Buying white wristbands and donating money from the comfort of your lounge room to send abroad is one thing. Actually giving up your time and going to a poorer part of the world to contribute your knowledge, skills or labor is quite

another... volunteering abroad should be the best thing you've ever done, but the onus is on you to act responsibly, do the research and find a volunteer program that works both for you and for the host community. (Hindle et al., 2007, p.9)

The notion of combining an enjoyable vacation with the goodwill of contributing to others was highlighted by Tomazos & Butler (2012), who viewed volunteer tourism as a synthesis of tourism activity and volunteering services. This creates benefits for both the participant (the touristic component) and the local community (the volunteering component). There has been increased attention in recent studies focusing on volunteer motives and behavior, destination community contributions and overall satisfaction (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Lo & Lee, 2011; Lyons & Wearing, 2008). In addition, the supposition that volunteer tourism is valuable because 'some lives are for saving while others are for being saviors' had been extensively debated in both popular media and the academic community (Coran, 2011, p.1464). Much of the focus in current studies have centered on the volunteer – particularly within the context of participant motives and characteristics, impacts on host communities, and association with sustainable development (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2011; McGehee, 2012; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001); and strongly featuring humanitarian, heritage or ecumenical projects and organizations. It was also observed that many studies featured participants volunteering during shorter term vacations or 'mini-breaks'.

As indicated in Daldeniz & Hampton (2011, p.30), there is a need to differentiate 'VOLUNtourists' (whose main motivation is the commitment to a specific project) from 'volunTOURISTS' (whose motivating driver is the tourism activity) for clearer understanding and definitive segregation between the two distinct participant types; as it will influence factors such as (1) duration of the volunteer commitment, (2) motives and intentions, (3) depth of the experience, and (4) degree of learning or personal transformation. Brown (2008, p.492) similarly differentiated the 'volunteer-minded traveler' from the 'vacation-minded traveler', where 'volunteer vacationers' were perceived to display values and characteristics more closely associated to volunteerism motives than the conventional mass tourist. Following a review of literature, it was noted that there has been some, though limited research done which focuses on the wildlife voluntourist experience associated with trip expectations, motives for selecting activity and site, depth of learning and self transformation.

The purpose of this study is thus to review the profile of wildlife voluntourists based on the dimensions of (1) trip expectations and motives for site selection, (2) evaluation of overall experience, and (3) profundity of transformational learning. Hence, the research objectives of the study were to:

- i. Examine participants' motives for volunteering during their vacation time and choice of destination/project selected.

- ii. Determine the influence of participants' pre-trip preparation and expectations on the overall satisfaction of the volunteer experience.
- iii. Explore participants' depth of transformative learning and self-development following the volunteer experience.

Literature review

Volunteerism, Tourism and Voluntourism

Volunteering is viewed as the cluster of activities in which 'time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organization' (Wilson, 2000, p.215). The idea of volunteers as providing organized unpaid labor and without obligations for the benefit of others was also similarly noted in other studies (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2007; Conran, 2011; Tomazos & Butler, 2012). Ellis & Campbell (2005) however countered that defining volunteering from only the perspective of 'non-payment' is too restrictive, asserting there is a need to go beyond remuneration and examine motives behind the volunteer spirit itself. They define volunteers as people who choose to act in a socially responsible manner in recognition of a need, exceed one's necessary obligations and does not receive any monetary profit for the effort (Ellis & Campbell, 2005). It is this desire to contribute and serve, or give back to society that underpins much of the core motivations expressed by volunteers (Brown, 2008; Coghlan & Gooch, 2012; Wearing, 2011; Zahra, 2008). People generally agree that helping others is a moral obligation and social exchange which can create a valuable and mutually beneficial relationship between donors and recipients. As highlighted by Sin (2010), people are now living in a world of 'heightened responsibilities', where socially responsible citizenship, moral obligations to the underprivileged and ethical environmental considerations is a norm, rather than exception. Volunteers are thus motivated by a desire to contribute positive social action, fight social injustice and causes, or simply fulfill personal gratification or empathies (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Ellis & Campbell, 2005; Mustonen, 2006).

There are thousands of volunteer opportunities around the world and a plethora of ways to get involved, depending on what the volunteer wants to do and what is needed by the community at the destination to which they will be traveling (Hindle et al., 2007). With so many options and causes vying for volunteer efforts and sponsorship dollars, the ability to effectively attract, recruit and foster long term commitment from volunteers and donors is vital. Non-profit and volunteer organizations often rely heavily on donations, sponsors and volunteers for their operations and survival. As recommended by Cemalcilar (2009), a key element to manage successful initiation and sustainability of volunteerism is the identification of its determinants and motivators.

Before reviewing the concept of voluntourism, it is useful to first look at tourism and the context within which voluntourism occurs. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 1995)

defines tourism as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon involving the ‘movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for personal or business/professional purposes’ (p.1). Leiper (1995, as cited in Richardson & Fluker, 2008) further stated that when looking at tourism, it is important to consider the ideas and opinions that people hold; since it shapes holiday choices, determining how people decide where to go and what they will do whilst away. Today’s globalized tourism demand has created a *touristic* culture (Franklin & Crang, 2001), where people seek tourism activities which bring them beyond the mundane generic tourist gaze towards more purposeful and distinctive ways to spend their leisure time (Howie, 2010; Pearce, 2011; Urry, 1992). MacCannell (1976, as cited in Wearing, 2001) also suggested that tourists are often motivated to seek a deeper involvement and engagement with the destination’s societies, culture and environment during their travels.

Voluntourism vacations were developed as an alternative (and more sustainable) form of tourism in which tourists volunteer in projects within destination host communities as part of their travel (Clemmons, 2012; Alonso & Liu, 2012; Sin, 2009). It was born with the aspiration of fostering global citizenship amongst participants (Lyons et al., 2011; Weaver, 2008), where tourism is able to contribute positive social, ecological and economic benefits to host destinations and communities. As highlighted by Barbieri et al. (2012), these small-scale alternative tourism activities are ‘people centered, community-led and pursues spreading benefits to hosts, guests and the surrounding cultural and social environments’ (p. 509). Tourists who choose such activities seek experiences that offer a symbiosis between their own personal development and tangible positive contributions to society. Wearing (2001) provided an early definition of volunteer tourism, defining volunteer tourists as tourists who ‘...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’ (p.1).

While there have been varying perspectives and definitions of volunteer tourism (or voluntourism) over the years, the majority refer to those activities and experiences involving tourists who undertake structured social and / or environment work at destinations without receipt of financial compensation (McGehee, 2011; Mustonen, 2006; Lyon & Wearing, 2008). As highlighted by McGehee & Santos (2005), voluntourists use their leisure time and income to travel out of their regular spheres to assist and serve others; searching for meaningful experiences by volunteering and improving some aspect(s) of the host community during their visit. Within the context of wildlife and environmental conservation, this symbiotic relationship is particularly noticeable – volunteers give their time, effort and skills to aid nature, and in return gain valuable personal and social benefits (Barbieri et al., 2012; Broad & Jenkins, 2008; Wearing, 2001). Voluntourism, unlike conventional mass tourism, encompasses a more immediate connection between the tourist activity, volunteer work, tangible benefits and contributions to the destinations’ social and natural

environment (Brown, 2008; Weaver, 2008).

Voluntourism: A Beneficial Symbiosis or an Oxymoron?

When the above philosophies of ‘paying it forward’ are combined with the perceived benefits of tourism (both for the visitors as well as host communities), it seems that an ideal symbiotic relationship is formed. This paradigm shift has gained momentum over the years and today, voluntourism represents a dominant phenomenon and form of ‘collective human knowledge’ intrinsically linked to commonly shared worldviews (Hall, 2011; Spencer, 1998) about social consciousness. While voluntourism has received strong support from a myriad of stakeholder groups globally, it is not without its critics and contradictions. No matter how admirable and sincere the intentions, there are challenges and issues arising from contrasting altruistic and personal motives, or wider societal/environmental impacts from those actions. For example, it is frequently observed that many voluntourists see the opportunity to travel, a chance to experience a new culture, the thrill of adventure and escape, the novelty of new discoveries, personal recognition and status elevation (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Chan, 2011; Brown, 2008; Lo and Lee, 2011; McGehee, 2012; Mustonen, 2006) as core influencers when selecting a volunteer activity and / or destination.

In volunteer tourism collateral, voluntourists are often described as being different (and better) than other conventional mass tourists since they are motivated by more than just ‘pleasant diversions and alternative experiences’ (Barbieri et al., 2012, p. 509), and are strongly committed to specific causes or socially responsible actions (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Sin, 2010). For many voluntourists, a common key motivation for embarking on an expedition is the desire for that *one* chance to make a *real* impact in the world (Brown, 2008; Clemmons, 2012; Wickens, 2011), leave behind a legacy, and in the process of participation and engagement, the potential for personal transformation or self discovery (Chan, 2011; Coghlan & Gooch, 2012; Lepp, 2011; Tomazos & Butler, 2012; Zahra, 2008). These tourists see travel and leisure as a means to not only enhance their own personal growth and satisfaction, but also contribute to the development of the host community and its peoples (Barbieri et al., 2012; Lo & Lee, 2011; Lyons et al., 2011; Wearing, 2001).

However, critics have questioned the *real* value of volunteer tourism (Sin, 2010). As conceded, voluntourists’ motivations are markedly different from that of other tourists – not only in terms of the activities chosen or destinations selected, but also push factors that drive them to seek out these experiences. By *traveling with a purpose*, tourists find a way to give back to society while immersing in another culture and making meaningful human connections (Donaldson, 2011). Despite this affirmative intention, it should however also be noted that voluntourists often do not discard all the characteristics commonly exhibited by other typical tourists, and are constantly at the juxtaposition of negotiating and performing

their identities both as a volunteer and a tourist (Sin, 2009). These tourists would utilize similar tourism services, transportation and destination resources, just as other tourists do. In fact, Weaver (2008) went on to suggest the phenomenon of veneer volunteer tourism in which exists the righteous facades, that in reality camouflage actions no different from less regarded forms of tourism.

So that begets the question: can voluntourism truly make a real difference, act as a catalyst for positive change, emancipation and sustainable development; or inadvertently facilitate dependency, hegemony and structural inequalities, or burden the host community and its environment (McGehee, 2012; Lyons et al., 2011)? As discussed in Sin's (2010) study, the issues of power hierarchies, inequality of visitor-host relationship and dependency through misplaced generosity can, and are observed in volunteer tourism, not unlike what is seen in conventional mass tourism. As questioned by Singh (2004, as cited in Tomazos & Butler, 2012, p.177), could voluntourism be more than just a 'conscientious practice of righteous tourism-one that comes closest to utopia...or regarded as an altruistic form of tourism, in which... upholds the highest ideals, intrinsically interwoven in the tourism phenomenon'?

Voluntourism as a Transformative Journey

Clemmons (2012) introduced the concept of self development and transformational learning in which he highlighted that volunteering not only had an impact on recipients through the services voluntourists perform, but also realize a real impact on, and difference in themselves as a result of the volunteer experience. Coghlan & Gooch (2011) had similarly described how volunteers and hosts learn and change as a result of the *lived-experience*. In their study, Coghlan & Gooch (2011) adapted Sipos, Battisti & Grimm's (2008) model of transformative sustainable learning (figure 1), suggesting that voluntourism experiences can be examined through a combination of Head (engagement - cognitive domain), Hands (enactment - psychomotor domain) and Heart (enablement - affective domain). Alonso & Liu (2012, p.5) had similarly described the personal gains volunteers received through their experiences within the trilogy of 'mental health', 'physical health' and 'life satisfaction'. McGehee & Santos (2005) further examined the notion of change, suggesting that participation in voluntourism experiences can raise one's consciousness and support for social movements through involvement in organized collective action.

From the literature reviewed, it was observed that change and transformation for voluntourists can occur from various aspects, depending of their personal motives, demographic profile and cultural background, vis-à-vis that of the host community. This concept of transformation as a result of interaction with *the other* and its affect on *the self* had been discussed by numerous authors (Cohen, 1974; Lepp, 2011; Lyons & Wearing, 2001; Schuetz, 1944; Sin, 2009; Zahra, 2011), and remain one of the more popular areas of discourse in voluntourism study. For example, Lepp's (2011) study of wildlife volunteers in

Kenya recognized benefits volunteer tourists gained in terms of new perspectives, personal reflection and discovery of self and others as a result of the intense and continued interaction with the host community.

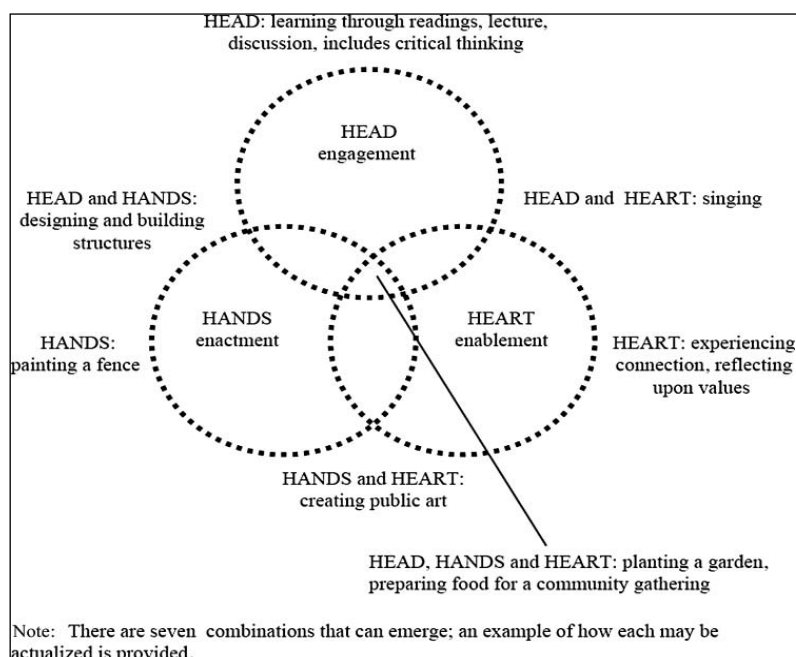


Figure 1: The constituents and synergies leading to transformative sustainability learning (Source: Coghlan & Gooch, 2011, p.717; Sipos et al., 2008, p.75).

While some voluntourists have expressed that volunteer tourism offers a challenge and adventure, allowing them to prove themselves or realize potential; others have spoken of gaining heightened awareness and new perceptions of themselves/self-identity as a result of exposure and interaction with 'others' (Brown, 2008; Sin, 2009; Urry, 1992; Wickens, 2011). Zahra & McIntosh (2007, as cited in Coghlan & Gooch, 2011) and Zahra (2011) described the cathartic nature of voluntourism, where the experience can facilitate positive transformations and life-changing developments for participants, establishing long-lasting impacts, and shift participants' self consciousness in a deep and structural manner to radically and permanently alter how they may see themselves and their relationships with others or the environment.

With the above in mind, Coghlan & Gooch (2012) suggested that to ensure the sustainability of volunteer programs and maximize contributions to the destination, volunteer tourism organizers need to not only provide a positive volunteer tourism experience for participants, but also design programs which enable volunteer tourists to develop their personal plan of action, apply that to trying out new roles or learning opportunities, and finally, receiving feedback for their performance. This link between a stimulating volunteer tourism experience, overall satisfaction and sustainability of the volunteer tourism program was also emphasized by Chan (2011) and Zahra (2011). In those studies, participants had similarly

described the experiential nature of activities, deep personal awareness or self-discovery and the life-changing transformation that they had gone through as some of the main outcomes that emotionally connected with them most.

Study methods

As discussed, this study aims to investigate the wildlife voluntourist profile based on the dimensions outlined in figure 2 below. Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary (RG) in Boyup Brook, Western Australia will be the case study site for this study.

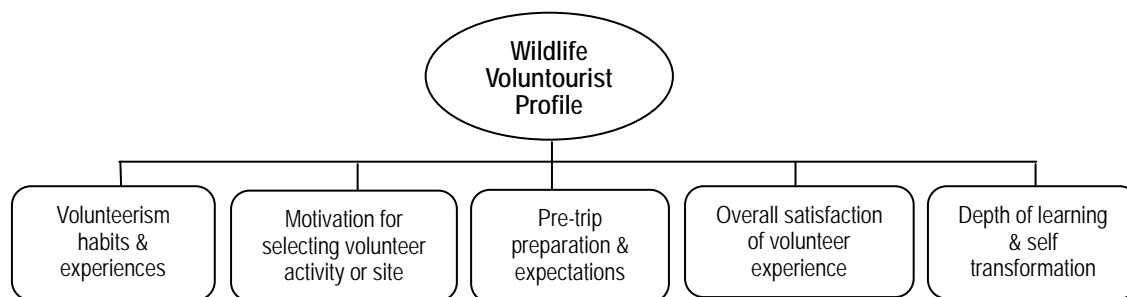


Fig. 2: Dimensions of Wildlife Voluntourist Profile to be investigated

While primary data collection was undertaken between September and November 2012, initial contact was established in early 2009 when the author undertook her initial voluntourism trip at RG. During a return visit to RG in June 2012, the author discussed the possibility of undertaking an exploratory study to investigate the profile of RG's voluntourists with the sanctuary's founder and manager. Such a study had not been undertaken before, and it is hoped that an enhanced understanding of its volunteer profile will help the sanctuary improve its volunteer, wildlife education and conservation programs. Following discussions in August and September, consent was obtained to proceed with the research and data collection in late September 2012.

Qualitative research was adopted since it will allow the flexibility and intrinsic openness from which a contextualized understanding of participants, their behavior, beliefs and lived experiences can be obtained (Hennik, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Purposeful sampling was used to deliberately select a small yet specific sample of participants (in this case, voluntourists who have worked at RG) who could provide information relevant to themes and threads within the study (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003); and where the individuality of their experiences, thoughts and responses could provide rich data and meaning in the analysis and discussion (Maxwell, 2013). This interpretative approach to mining data adopts the *Verstehen* philosophy to study a phenomenon through the participants' lived experiences within a specific situational, historical or social context (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). Typically, in-depth interviews and focus groups would be the data collection methods utilized in this type of research. However, due to the limited number of RG volunteers on-site at any particular time and nature of its volunteer program, it would not be feasible to

obtain the required sample population if that strategy were adopted. Additionally, since the majority of RG's voluntourists were international visitors, they would have completed their trip and returned to their origin countries at the time of research. Finally, keeping in mind that one of the core dimensions in the study was to investigate personal reflections of volunteers' transformational and learning journey, a post-activity study was deemed more appropriate.

An in-depth investigation was undertaken using a semi-structured questionnaire sent out via email to selected participants. The questionnaire was designed in a manner akin to an interview pro-forma, but is self-administered by respondents. Consisting of 21 questions, the questionnaire primarily featured open-ended questions categorized into five thematic clusters pertaining to participants' (1) volunteer stay at RG, (2) volunteerism interests, (3) voluntourism experience at RG, (4) post-trip thoughts and future plans, and (5) biographical profile. The invitation to participate in the study (and questionnaire pro-forma) was sent out through RG to protect the privacy of its volunteers' personal information. In total, 20 invitations were sent out to past volunteers from a range of biographical segments and 11 return responses were received. Completed questionnaires were each assigned a coded label (V1 – V11) to protect participants' identities and ensure anonymization of the data. Responses were transferred verbatim, to facilitate content analysis and coding. Data was clustered according to question numbers and common thematic categories to generate frequency counts and / or assess descriptive and textual content within each domain category. The interview data was additionally supplemented and triangulated with information gathered through relevant web content analysis, as well as government, industry and academic resources.

Study site

Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary (RG) is a working wildlife sanctuary located in the Shire of Boyup Brook, Western Australia. Situated approximately 270 kilometers south-east of Perth, the Boyup Brook townsite is a small rural community with a population of approximately 600; with about 1,500 total in the Shire (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Shire of Boyup Brook, 2011, 2010). Operating since 1996, RG is not a zoo or commercial wildlife park, but a working wildlife sanctuary and education centre specializing in the care of injured, sick and orphaned marsupials and other Australian wildlife (Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary, n.d.). A registered charity, it relies on donations, the support of sponsors and volunteers for its operations, upkeep and work; including the specialist care, rehabilitation and research of kangaroos, other marsupials, birds and Australian native wildlife. Its '*Adopt a Roo Gully Roo*' program and fund-raising projects are avenues through which sponsorship dollars and donations are received.

RG facilitates the dissemination of knowledge, understanding and interest of Australian wildlife through its wildlife education centre, Australian wildlife information database,

wildlife lectures, school visits, educational videos, books and other resources. Its popular documentary series *The Roo Gully Diaries* was a finalist in the Nature and Wildlife Category at the New York Film Festival in 2006 (ScreenWest, 2006) and had received critical acclaim both locally and overseas. RG also opens its doors to researchers, university students and graduates keen to undertake research on Australian wildlife – particularly, studies into marsupial behavior, biology and development. Due to the immersive volunteer role and extensive training required to prepare volunteers for the work they would perform, volunteers usually have to commit a minimum stay of one month during their placement (Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary, n.d.). During their stay, volunteers are expected to participate in all facets of work and life at RG, be it feeding and caring for the wildlife, constructing, fixing and cleaning out enclosures, conducting research, carrying out office and administrative duties, etc. or just preparing and having meals together.

Findings and discussion

Voluntourists’ Biographical Profile and Visit Characteristics

In total, 11 volunteers accepted the invitation to participate and completed the questionnaire. All study participants had been a volunteer at RG within the last seven years (2006 – 2012: a few more than once), and the majority (91% - 10 out of 11 participants) were within the 20 – 29 year-old age segment. 27%(3) were males and 73%(8) were female. 8 participants (73%) indicated it was their first time volunteering at RG; and their duration of stay ranged from two weeks to nine months. Table 1 below details the participants’ biographical profile and volunteer stay at RG.

Table 1: Voluntourist Biographical Profile

ID Label	Gender	Country of Origin	Age Group	Education	Occupation	Year Last Volunteered at RG	Duration of Stay (Length in Months)
V1	F	USA	20 - 29yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Medical Laboratory Scientist	2008	2
V2	M	UK	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Secondary School Science Technician	2008	7
V3	M	UK	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Currently Not Employed	2009	8

V4	F	Channel Islands	40 - 49 yrs	High School	Banking	2012	1
V5	F	Australia	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Veterinary Student	2012	0.5
V6	F	UK	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Prison Resettlement Officer	2010	1.5
V7	F	UK	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Pet Centre Sales Assistant	2009	6
V8	F	UK	20 - 29 yrs	College / Vocational	ESL Teacher	2006	9
V9	F	USA	20 - 29 yrs	Doctorate Degree	Postgraduate Student/Teaching Assistant	2006	1
V10	M	UK	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	Discovery Ranger (Parks & Wildlife Service)	2006	5.5
V11	F	USA	20 - 29 yrs	Undergraduate Degree	New Graduate (Applying for Postgraduate Studies)	2012	1

When asked how they knew about the sanctuary and its volunteer program, the main sources of information identified were from (1) their education institution (46%), (2) an internet search (36%), and (3) personal sources, e.g. friends and family (18%).

Volunteerism Experiences, Motives and Selection Criteria

Next, the study examined participants' volunteer tourism interests, motives for volunteering during their vacation time and choice of destination selected. Only three participants (27%) had undertaken volunteer work prior to their placement at RG: two (V5 and V10) had contributed to projects involving nature or wildlife, while one (V11) had participated in a community-based project sponsored by her university. Whether they were first-time or experienced volunteers, participants expressed several common reasons that inspired their decision to volunteer during their leisure time. Based on a narrative analysis of responses provided, the major reasons (figure 3) could be clustered into: (1) to gain practical experience and internship placement, (2) a passion for wildlife, (3) social-cultural exploration, and (4) a desire to contribute. These responses demonstrated a commonality with other studies on voluntourism motives (Alonso & Liu, 2012; Brown, 2008; Chen & Chen, 2011; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2012). The exception unique to this study was a stronger

emphasis, passion and interest in working with, and caring for wildlife, particularly Australian wildlife. When cross-examined with their responses on specific motivations for choosing Australia and RG, it was observed that the type of wildlife and social-cultural characteristics of the destination played a significant role in the site selection process.

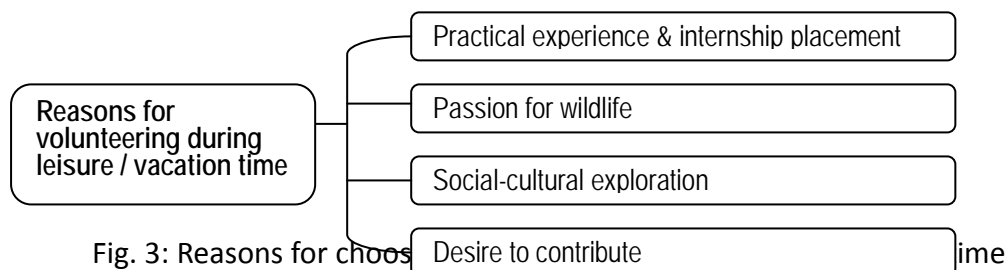


Fig. 3: Reasons for choosing to volunteer during leisure / vacation time

Participants were particularly attracted to the opportunities that Australia and RG were able to provide through its wildlife volunteer and education program, allowing them to marry their personal, vocational or research interests with their leisure and travel motivations:

V2: *'I [volunteered] at RG [for my] industry placement with my university. (Q6) It appealed to my sensibilities as a place [for] volunteering and I had heard good things about the location. The fact that it was in Australia also helped my decision as I had always wanted to visit.'*(Q7)

V9: *'I had a month break between university semesters, and I wanted to do something different. (Q6) [Kangaroos] are my favorite animals... I decided to volunteer during my vacation because I wanted to spend time with kangaroos.'* (Q7)

It was also observed that when deciding on a volunteer project or destination, the reputation and integrity of the volunteer organization impacted on the final decision too. Beyond their interests and passions, prospective volunteers also sought recommendations from others and read online reviews by previous volunteers on their experiences to diminish some of their concerns and risk variance:

V10: *'When I first heard [from others at my university] about RG, I had to go. I have always wanted to work with kangaroos and Australian wildlife.'* (Q7)

V11: *'It was always difficult to assess the quality of volunteer experiences in other countries via the internet. Every time I found a potentially suitable option, I would do a further web search for former volunteers' opinions on their experiences... Everything I found about RG was very positive. Plus, RG had a very informative website... [RG's manager] was very quick at responding to my questions and requests [and] seemed very genuine and honest.'* (Q7)

Pre-trip Preparations, Expectations and Satisfaction

The questionnaire proceeded to examine volunteers' pre-trip preparations, expectations and

overall satisfaction vis-à-vis their pre-trip expectations. These questions served to determine if the degree of preparation and knowledge were influential in affecting the expectations of what they would experience, roles and responsibilities they would perform, or learning outcomes to be gained. From there, it sought to determine if those factors impacted on participants' assessment about their overall satisfaction with the voluntourism experience. Participants had primarily focused their pre-trip preparation efforts on (1) travel plans and trip requirements, and (2) information about RG and the region (figure 4).

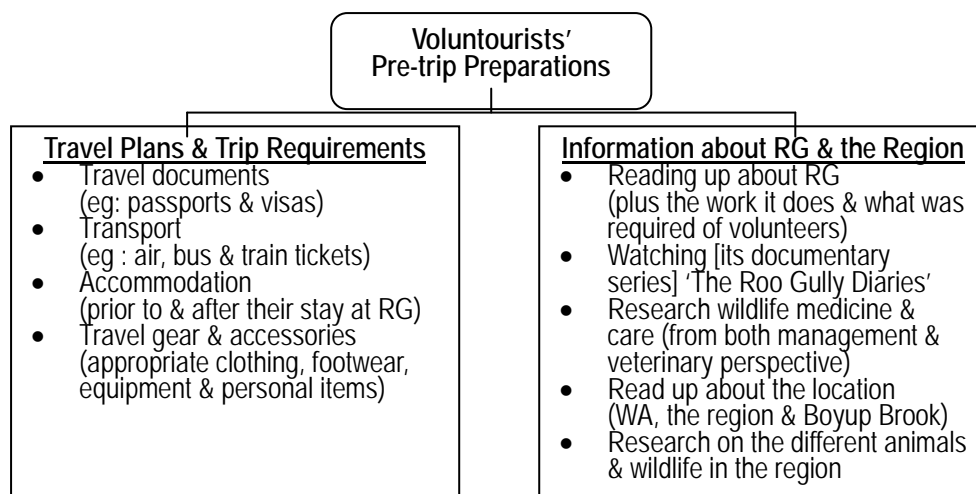


Fig. 4: Voluntourists' Pre-trip Preparations

Participants' opinions regarding pre-trip expectations and assessment of overall satisfaction saw a greater variance between the stated expectations and level of satisfaction. While there were varying degrees and areas of expectations articulated by participants (depending on their trip purpose, vocational interests and areas of specializations), all had expressed a positive overall experience. In similar studies on voluntourism experiences and satisfaction (Barbieri, et. al., 2012; Brown, 2008; Chen & Chen, 2011), observations pertaining to prior knowledge and understanding, preconceived expectations, peculiar interests, level of dedication to the cause and volunteer motives played a part in shaping participants' expectations and overall satisfaction. Some of these were similarly expressed by participants in this study:

V6: *'I expected to work hard but rewarding (sic). I did not expect the sanctuary to be as big as it is. I expected to learn and meet new people...learn more about life in Australia. (Q9) I would recommend it to anyone who enjoys being around animals, wants to learn [and] see more of the "real" Australia rather than just the tourist side.'* (Q10)

V11: *'The only preconceived thoughts I really had were based upon either comments written or pictures shown on the RG website (Q9). I had a wonderful and unforgettable experience at RG. I was overwhelmed by how welcoming [RG's manager] was to me [and how] I managed to become attached... I appreciated [the] trust...[and] hands-on learning experience.'* (Q10)

In addition to appreciating the depth of interaction with wildlife, rich learning experience and authenticity of social-cultural exchange, participants also narrated other expressions about their experience being: *‘the best thing they had ever done’, ‘their proudest achievement’, ‘a life altering, life affirming and amazing experience’, ‘fantastic but heart-wrenching’*. When asked to evaluate if their experience had met with their expectations (Q12), all respondents except one (V3) stated that it had. V3 however clarified his ‘no’, saying, *‘it surpassed my expectations in so many ways’*. Participants were also asked about specific memorable and / or challenging incidents they had encountered during their volunteer experience (Q11) which had an impact on them. There were numerous thoughts and feelings expressed which were clustered around eight common themes depicted in figure 5 below.

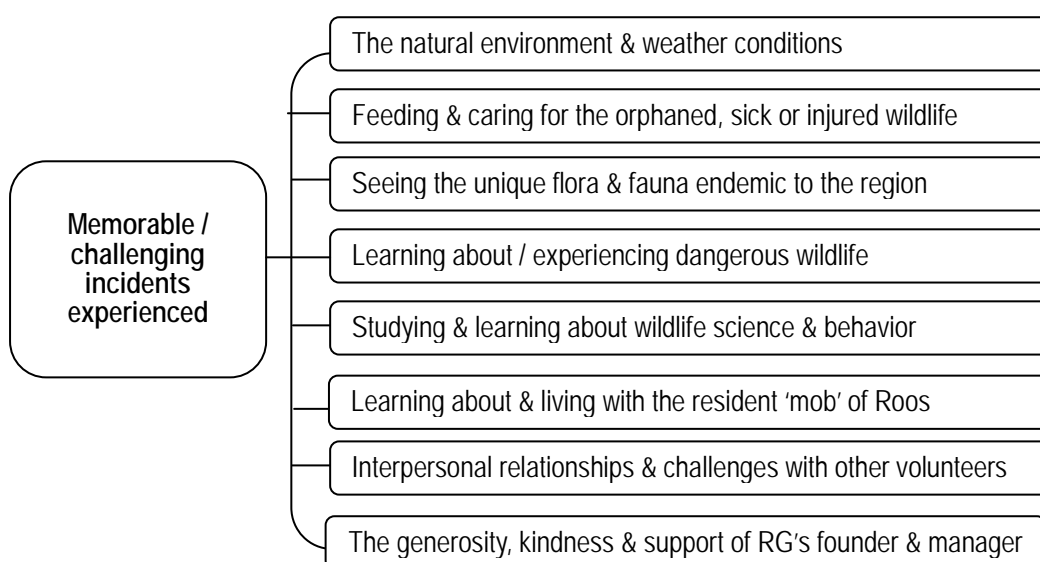


Fig. 5: Narratives about Memorable / Challenging Incidents during Volunteer Experience

The final question (Q13) in that section of the questionnaire examined participants’ tourism-related activities before, during and after their volunteer commitment at RG. 91% (10 out of 11 participants) indicated they had engaged in travel or tourism-related activities. Only one participant (V5) did not partake in any tourism-related activities, possibly because she was a local veterinary science student. Most participants had predominantly traveled around Western Australia and the region during their voluntourism trip, while others had included multiple Australian and international destinations (figure 6). For example, V6 had stayed at RG as part of a larger six-month round the world trip visiting 11 countries. The travel patterns and selected tourism-related activities correlate with respondents’ earlier narratives about specifically choosing RG, WA and/or Australia as their destination of choice.

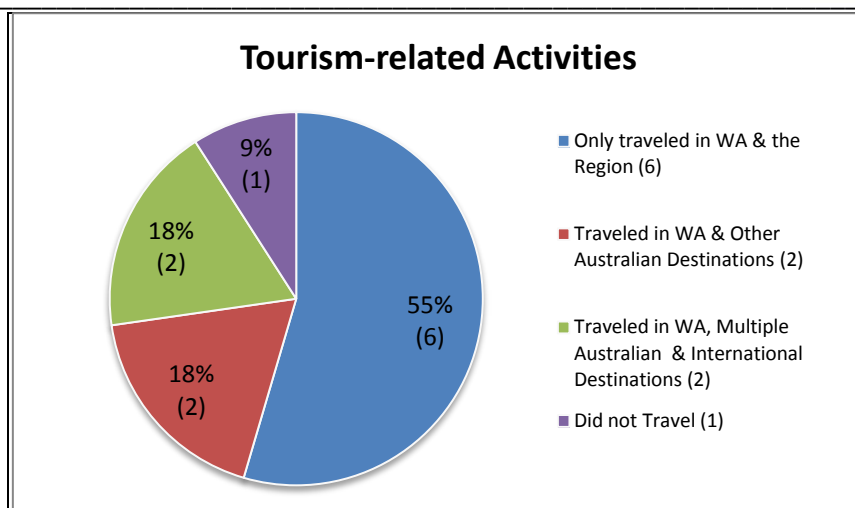


Fig. 6: Volunteers' tourism-related activities

Depth of Learning and Self Transformation

The concluding portion of the questionnaire (Q14 – 16) investigated the depth of transformative learning and self-development participants went through as a result of their volunteer experience. From the literature reviewed, there were numerous studies on voluntourism motivations and experiences exploring this phenomenon within the dimensions of (1) intrinsic benefits from volunteering, (2) experiential and transformative learning, (3) development of self identity and expression, (4) appreciation of others, (5) contribution to job skills and future career, and (6) sparking passion for future volunteer participation (Barbieri et al., 2012; Brown, 2008; Lyon & Wearing, 2011; Sin, 2009; Wickens, 2011; Zahra, 2008). Many of these opinions were similarly expressed in participants' reflections of their own experiences and voluntourism journey.

V1: *'Before RG, I was very young and naïve and I didn't have a lot of life experiences outside the norm I had grown up with. At RG, I learnt a lot about having great work ethic, working with and getting along with a wide range of culturally diverse people, and living in the moment' (Q14).*

V3: *'After becoming a more experienced volunteer at RG, it was my responsibility to teach new volunteers about the routines and [daily] life at the sanctuary. This responsibility, along with giving talks and guided tours to visitors helped shape me into a better person.' (Q14)*

There was a myriad of prevalent yet divergent narratives by participants when sharing their own experiences and transformational journey. These could be categorized into nine key thematic clusters as illustrated in figure 7 below.

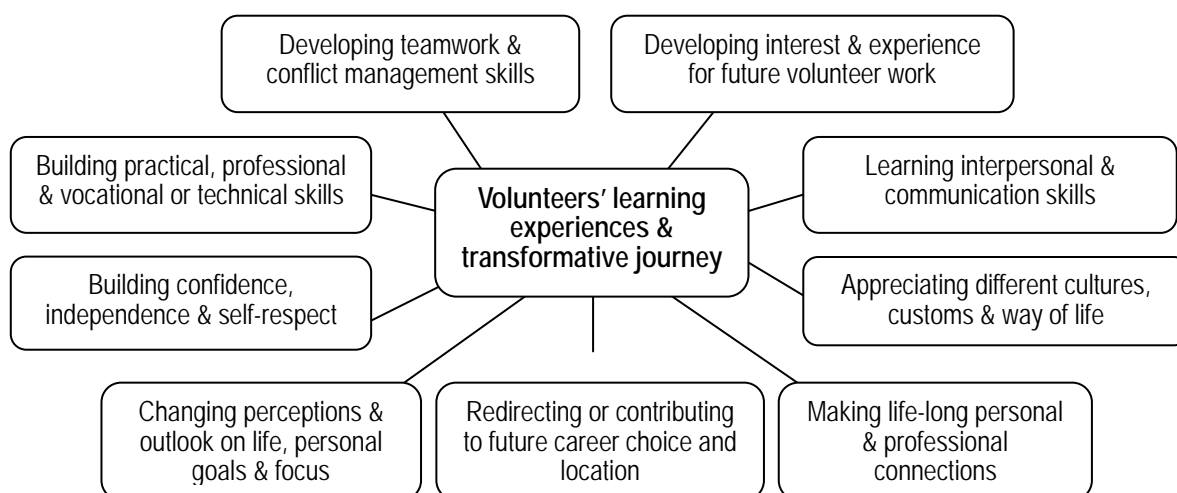


Fig. 7: Voluntourists' Aspects of Learning and Transformative Experiences

Barbieri et al. (2012) had similarly discussed the potential for personal transformation and liberation, development of self, socially responsible aspirations and fulfillment from voluntourism participation. This experiential and cathartic dimension was also explored by Brown (2008) and Sin (2009), who observed volunteers' narrations of self-actualization, identity enhancements, educational and spiritual journeys. The 3H model of transformative learning (figure 1) in sustainable and volunteer tourism was explored in previous literature (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Sipos et al., 2008). It was suggested that the interaction of Head (engagement), Hands (enactment) and Heart (enablement) created seven combinations of constituents and synergies integrating the learning process. The study participants' reflections and author's own experience supported this observation. Whilst at RG, volunteers would have the opportunity to experience each of these elements (table 2 next page).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The voluntourism segment while flourishing in contemporary tourism is still a sector in its formative years, struggling to build its practical, theoretical and epistemological foundations. The objective of this study was to investigate and understand the profile of wildlife voluntourists utilizing Roo Gully Wildlife Sanctuary and its volunteers as a focus-population. The research generated results based on the dimensions of (1) motives for voluntourism activity and site selection, (2) pre-trip preparations and expectations, (3) evaluation of overall satisfaction, and (4) intensity of experiential and transformational learning.

Table 2: Constituents and Synergies of Volunteers’ Transformative Learning

Constituents	Some examples of wildlife volunteers’ experience
Head	Learning & researching about Australia, RG & Australian wildlife
Hands	Building fences, cleaning enclosures, checking grass levels
Head & Hands	Designing & building enclosures for specific wildlife types / needs
Heart	Experiencing love, concern (& sometimes sadness) for the animals
Hands & Heart	Daily preparations of food & feeding for different animals
Head & Heart	Giving talks & guided tours, sharing personal experiences
Head, Hands & Heart	Acting as ‘surrogate mum’ to orphaned Joeys needing critical care

The results showed that while volunteers may have different levels of pre-trip preparation, technical knowledge and preconceived expectations, they were on the whole satisfied with the experience. From the narratives reviewed, participants had repeatedly expressed how their experience had greatly shaped their points of view, personal development and sense of self, as well as spiritual, social and emotional well-being. Participants had also expressed an appreciation for having been a part of the place (RG), the community (of volunteers, the RG team, and local residents in Boyup Brook) and the country (WA and the region in particular).

While participants in this study had demonstrated similar traits and characteristics observed in other research, the deviation if any, had been a significantly stronger emphasis placed on selecting a destination and site specific to their passion for Australia, Kangaroos and Australian wildlife. Of course, the majority of participants also articulated a keenness to give back and contribute to a worthwhile cause. With that in mind and observations gained from related studies, it can be said that effective interpretation in volunteer and conservation programs are an important consideration. It helps to not only provide background information and communicative tools to facilitate pre-trip search, it also serves to set expectations and manage pre-conceived notions. It was observed that for many volunteers, being able to learn about, read the stories and see the photos about RG, the wildlife, the local region, as well as the typical day of a volunteer helped immensely. They were able to better prepare for their trip (be it mentally, physically or resource wise, like clothing, equipment, etc) and have a much clearer and realistic mindset prior to and upon arrival. This in turn facilitated more positive experiences, word of mouth, higher frequencies of return visits, sponsorship / donation dollars, and continued connection with RG. For non-

profits like RG and low-profile rural communities like Boyup Brook, this can be particularly beneficial. Volunteers who travel to Boyup Brook do so with the specific intention of being there in RG. Thus, beyond the transformative and learning benefits for volunteers, environmental, social-cultural and community benefits can also be realized.

The author would like to make a final recommendation pertaining to suggestions for more effectual and sustainable transformative learning. As discussed in the literature, successful transformative learning requires a shift in participants' self consciousness structurally, radically and permanently. There is a need to develop volunteer programs where participants are able to not only apply their knowledge, new skills and task roles learnt, but also receive feedback for their performance (Coghlan & Gooch, 2012). With this in mind, the author proposes that the 3H model of sustainable transformative learning be enhanced to include a *fourth 'H' – Hindsight* (figure 8). Through the study, it was observed that while the 3H's of Head, Heart and Hands were particularly relevant and practical during the volunteer activity and process, more could be done to develop the post-activity dimension of the volunteer tourism experience to enhance the sustainability of the transformative learning process. Within this context, *hindsight (evaluation)* would fulfill a reflective and retrospective purpose – the ability for participants to step back and review their experience after the activity. Academics in other disciplines (such as education and project management) commonly recommend a need for post-activity feedback and evaluative mechanisms to ensure effective learning.

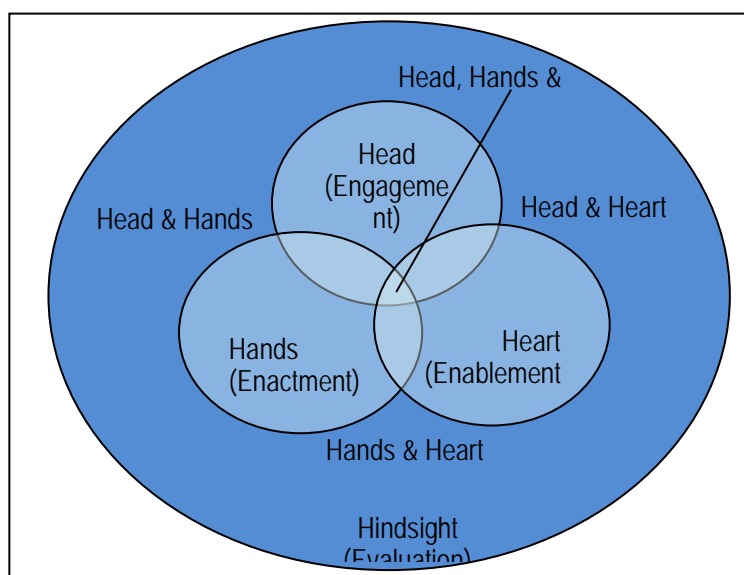


Fig. 8: Proposed 4H Conceptual Model Transformative Learning

Canziani, Sonmez, Hsieh & Byrd (2012) stated that in order to successfully manage and promote learning in sustainable education, an integrated learning system with a feedback loop is necessary. Their model of holistic learning incorporated the systems concept where a

feedback loop is included to facilitate learning evaluation and reflection. Kransdorff (1996) also discussed the benefits of hindsight in post-event analysis, where participants could learn from one's own (and others') experiences. Constructive feedback and experiential reflection could help to enhance performance, strengthen belief systems and change attitudes. While these studies were within the context of education, business and learning organizations, the key ideas and concepts could be suitably applied within the voluntourism phenomenon.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As the study focused on a purposefully selected group of volunteers from a particular site, it is acknowledged that the results derived may not be a definitive generalization of all wildlife voluntourism types. Additionally, participants in the study were from a fairly similar profile and may not be sufficiently diverse to provide a comprehensive description of wildlife voluntourism as a whole. While the sampled cases had presented theoretical saturation within this study, it should be considered if a broader search would generate more diverse and robust results.

The study had endeavored to present some new dimensions and elements of the wildlife voluntourism phenomenon. While the discussions reviewed common observations articulated in other studies, it also highlighted divergent issues and impacts which could be explored in future research. For example, reviewing the proposed 4H model for transformational learning, future studies could examine the transformative process from the dimension of hindsight (evaluation) and its interaction with other aspects of the voluntourism experience. Future studies could also investigate participants from other destinations, project sites or activity type. It would additionally be interesting to review the transformational learning process from the perspective of other stakeholders in wildlife voluntourism – e.g: the local community and voluntourism organizations. Finally, as indicated, this study had adopted the use of a questionnaire due to the limitations of existing circumstances. Future research could be conducted using ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews and focus groups to enable greater data richness and scope.

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