

Introduction: Why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?: Overview

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Purpose – This paper gives an overview of the question ‘why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?’ and introduces the articles in this special issue.

Approach - An ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) Festival of Social Science funded event, entitled ‘*Pursuing Quality in International Volunteering*’ was held at the University of Brighton in November 2013. This event brought together academics and practitioners in a successful debate, but it was also, however, recognised that this was the first step on a long journey. The articles are drawn from attendees both from the ESRC event and the wider international volunteer tourism network of academics and practitioners.

Findings – This paper introduces the key stakeholders of international volunteer tourism and the extent to which their voices are prominent (or not) in respect of the issues of achieving quality. Further, the paper highlights a number of quality mechanisms that are offered as solutions to the challenges that currently beleaguer international volunteer tourism.

Research limitations /implications – Whilst not all the key stakeholder voices are represented in this theme issue, the discussions and implications that are drawn out are of importance to all stakeholder groups.

Originality/value - This is the first time a journal issue has focused on the challenges of achieving quality in respect of international volunteer tourism.

Keywords Certification, Quality, International volunteer tourism, Stakeholder voices, Voluntourism

Introduction

“There is no overt criticism of volunteer tourism in the literature, in part because little research has been undertaken on this topic, but also because its laudable character and outcomes may render it more resistant to critical scrutiny” (Weaver, 2006, p. 46).

Whilst the international volunteering tourism has only been prominent since 2000, since this quote was written in 2006 (Weaver, 2006) two things have changed: (1) research in the international volunteer tourism area has grown, there are now approximately 550 articles and five books, with several more on their way as indicated by publishers websites, and furthermore journalist articles are commonplace in a range of newspapers and magazines and (2) more importantly, the level of criticism of international volunteer tourism from academics, practitioners and the media has been increasing. The passive acceptance of international volunteer tourism as a ‘saving the world’ concept that was palpable in the early literature, and to some extent the media, has been overtaken by critical discourses which challenge the ‘laudable character’ and ethical status of international volunteer tourism.

Before engaging a bit more closely with the strategic question of this issue it is necessary to set the scene in respect of international volunteer tourism. Whilst International volunteer tourism clearly appeals to the 'youth of today', it must be clear that international volunteer tourism is not homogenous and the proliferation of organisations (charities, private, social enterprises, brokers etc.,) entering the marketplace has meant that the offerings have become highly segmented with opportunities for volunteering at different stages of a person's lifecycle - youth, mid-life, retirement, families etc., indicating a wide age range of participation (Brown and Morrison, 2003; Coghlan, 2008; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004). Furthermore, in terms of demographics women are generally more likely to participate in volunteer tourism than men (Brown and Morrison, 2003; McGehee, 2002; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004). Alongside the myriad of volunteer tourism organisations and market segments, a move from volunteer *projects* to volunteer *products* has also taken place; meaning that the value chain between customer, company and community has become more tenuous. The movement of volunteers is predominantly from the north to south, although there is now a growth in organisations from the South making offerings at lower prices that are thereby setting up in direct competition to their Northern counterparts. It also needs to be acknowledged here that not all international volunteer tourism is situated in community settings; many of the environmentally-orientated projects are in remote locations with the nearest community being some distance away, although it is not unusual that local guides will be used on the project. What is important to recognise is that regardless of where the project takes place the quality of the offerings should be working to achieve a 'best practice' level.

The growing complexity of the international volunteer tourism marketplace therefore makes defining international volunteer tourism all the more difficult. Wearing (2001) is the most cited definition of volunteer tourism (and is to be found in several of the papers of this issue) but even Wearing (see Lyons and Wearing 2008, Benson, 2011) now agrees that his earlier definition is narrow in focus. Other definitions are also evident in the literature and are also addressed in several of the papers of this special issue. In the forthcoming articles you will see the terms 'international volunteer tourism'; 'volunteer tourism' and 'voluntourism' used. For the most part the articles use the terms interchangeably and whilst nuances of the terms could be discussed this would not move forward the broader debate regarding the strategic question of this special issue and will not be pursued further here.

This theme of this issue then is to examine 'Why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?' with the discussion first centring on the 'why' and then the 'how'

The 'Why'

The why is clearly tied up with the phenomenal growth (TRAM, 2008, Mintel, 2007) of the international volunteer tourism market. The numbers were relatively stable throughout the recent recession and the growth of this sector is predicted to continue. With this growth, as indicated in the opening paragraph, the marketplace has become more commercialised (see Benson and Wearing, 2012) and the criticisms of the international volunteer tourism sector can be heard though the most prominent stakeholder voices outlining their discontent. The loudest of these voices are the volunteers, which is also evident in a number of the articles in this issue. The voice of the communities who engage with international volunteer tourism projects is growing stronger but it is a voice that is often heard through a third party and appears to be not an easy voice to access. This can also be seen when looking at the papers of this special issue. The voice of the organisations is often defensive but they remain active listeners when it comes to the criticisms. What is less clear is the extent to which they actively engage in changing their business practices although anecdotal and ad hoc stories are evident. There are a number of papers in this special issue that highlight the organisational voice. Despite some countries being net receivers of large hordes of volunteers, the

voices of governments still remain relatively passive worldwide; they are also conspicuous by their absence in collection of work.

Overall, the papers in this issue do an excellent job in highlighting the range of criticisms of the sector, which clearly lead the reader to an understanding of why the international volunteer experience needs to be improved. The confluence of criticisms that have emerged and are still emerging as the sector continues to change (e.g. companies operating in the South) clearly demonstrate that solutions to the challenges are required if the sector is to achieve best practice. Consequently, the mechanisms (the “how”) of achieving best practice in international volunteer tourism become all important.

The ‘How’

The notion of ‘quality’ to ensure and enhance the worth and value in tourism products is not new (see for example Black and Crabtree, 2007; Font and Buckley, 2001). It is therefore not too surprising that, as a response to the criticisms of the sector, the quality assurance mechanisms used for tourism have been extended to address international volunteer tourism. As a result a number of quality-related initiatives are now emerging in order to establish at least a quality threshold for the sector.

Alongside a whole host of Tourism Awards of Excellence, there are now awards for volunteer tourism. Whilst there is no discussion in the forthcoming articles about Volunteer Tourism Awards of Excellence, there is no doubt that they have grown in popularity within the last decade. Organisations’ websites display them as ‘badges of honour’ and it is generally accepted that due diligence and good practice is taking place by those both ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ the awards.

Probably the most popular of the quality mechanisms are those associated with certification; codes of conduct; guidelines and accreditation. There are now a growing number of such schemes for the international volunteering tourism sector: Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa (FFSA) published their Fair Trade Certification standards for volunteer tourism in May 2010, which cover labour, legal, human resource practice, skills development, employment equity, ownership, environmental management and product quality. September 2012 saw the launch of The Ecotourism Societies (TIES) ‘International Voluntourism Guidelines for Commercial Operators’. The UK-based Tourism Concern developed a set of standards (launched 2014) based on the Comhlmh guidelines for Gap Year and International Volunteering. ABTA (Association of British Travel Agents) recently (Autumn 2014) called for tenders to write guidelines for its members who offer volunteer tourism products. Whilst it is evident from these initiatives there is the desire to guide and provide oversight to the international volunteer tourism sector, and to some extent the exercise is a vehicle for the ‘how’, it is still too early to tell the extent to which this will change practice. Certification will be further discussed in article one.

Monitoring and evaluation is also used as a quality assurance mechanism and whilst companies may engage in these processes, they are not always widely publicised. There is some evidence in some of the articles that follow that monitoring and evaluation has initiated change although this has not been wide scale.

To face some of the challenges and criticisms aimed at the international volunteer tourism sector, an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science funded event entitled “Pursuing Quality in International Volunteering” was held at the University of Brighton in November 2013. Whilst the engagement of academics at this event was expected, what was particularly rewarding was the number of practitioners that participated as both speakers and delegates. Further, three organisations (ATLAS Volunteer Tourism Research Group[2], Biosphere Expeditions[3]

and Blue Ventures[4]) sponsored post-event drinks to enable the dialogue to continue long after the formal presentations and plenary session. This event brought together academics and practitioners in a successful debate, but it was also recognised that this was the first step on a long journey. To disseminate the discussions, the idea for this issue was born; consequently, the articles are drawn from attendees at the ESRC event and the wider international volunteer tourism network of academics and practitioners.

The article by Rattan examines the discourses around the use of certification in tourism related products. She discusses the extent to which certification is applicable to the international volunteer tourism sector and whether it could assuage the current criticisms. Rattan contends that certification ideally makes organisations accountable for their business, improves standards and creates visibility within the industry. However, there is a lack of evidence in tourism that certification has been applied effectively in the past, therefore, if certification is to work for the international volunteer tourism sector, organisations will need to engage in the debate.

After this, Phelan focuses on the volunteer voice in Botswana by reporting on three different projects:

- wildlife and conservation;
- HIV/AIDS testing and prevention education; and
- orphanage volunteerism.

In this article Phelan clearly outlines the challenges and concerns of the volunteer tourists. Many of these concerns echo those reported in the more general literature. One theme that is surprising is the extent to which volunteers had difficulty in finding a project in Botswana particularly when you consider the myriad of projects available on line. In her findings, all the volunteers interviewed were positive about their experience despite the issues they encountered and would volunteer again. Many of the themed issues identified in this article are linked to discontent on how the communities are impacted upon and volunteers clearly believe that local communities should benefit more from their presence.

The third article by Easton and Wise continues with the volunteer voice but also discusses organisations' promotional material. Online data from commercial websites offering volunteer experiences and TripAdvisor forums are analysed. Data related to Nepal has been specifically used. This approach illustrates how commercial websites emphasise achievable positive outcomes by unskilled/unqualified volunteers, with the support of credible volunteer organisations. Conversely, the user-generated content, from volunteers, focuses on negative outcomes associated with volunteer tourism. This article suggests that, with the rise of social media, volunteer organisations operating in Nepal, and therefore presumably elsewhere, will no longer be able to ignore the changing sector dynamics.

The next paper, article 4, by Smith and Font continues with the theme of examining the international volunteer tourism sector by using data gathered from websites. However, the paper by Smith and Font focused only on the organisations. Further, this is a follow up study of previous work in order to examine the extent to which the knowledge of the earlier study influenced change in the organisations in the study. In the 2012 study they indicated that there was overall low performance on the extended marketing mix that related to responsibility. This was still evident in the current study. Smith and Font conclude that international volunteer tourism organisations may be prepared to learn from feedback on the quality of their responsibility communications and that communication of academic work outlining results may influence market improvement.

The theme of research being able to generate change is continued in article 5 by Lynch, a travel writer for Bradt Publications, who authored the book *'Wildlife & Conservation Volunteering: The Complete Guide'*. The paper explores his journey (from 2006 to now) in the quest to find a conservation project for which he could volunteer. The plethora of confusing choices and 'weasel words' meant that he found it impossible to make a rational choice. After further investigation and by talking to numerous stakeholders Lynch decided the solution was to develop 'The Audit' which evaluated 53 volunteer organisations. A consequence of the book, which he had not considered prior to its publication, was the engagement by organisations that had not scored all that well in some of the criteria. Whilst at first challenging the overall score, some organisations then engaged in a more meaningful dialogue and were keen to know how to improve their scores before publication of the next edition of the book.

In Article 6 Klaver examines a number of stakeholders in a Guatemalan organisation offering placements to volunteers in various locations throughout the country. Klaver (like Phelan above), examines three different projects, though Klaver's volunteer projects are all child related: an orphanage, street children and a school. A key aspect of this study was to examine cultural differences between individualism (Western volunteers) and collectivism (Guatemalan stakeholders). Klaver found that cultural differences did not make collaboration difficult and that all stakeholders had a positive experience albeit for different reasons. A key finding of this study was that the organisation lacked transparent practices and whilst it is unclear the extent to which this lack of transparency exists elsewhere, the issue of quality is pertinent here.

With the growing number of child-related projects (see Phelan and Klaver articles) and the issues this brings as to the risks posed when working with children, the final article, article 7, is written by Wilson from a practitioner viewpoint, exploring the complex issues that surround such projects. In particular she addresses a number of key issues around projects meeting adequate standards. Wilson reports that she has undertaken training with other organisations and given them the tools to engage in good practice. However, on following up by evaluating the impact of training she found that the majority of the organisations had not changed their practices. Despite this, Wilson searches for the win-win situation and outlines a checklist of minimum standards to ensure good practice which she extols as imperative given that the 'stakes are high if we get it wrong' when working with children.

The final article offers a discussion and conclusion (Benson) drawing together the salient points from the seven articles of the special issue.

Notes

1. The Irish development organization Comhlámh. One of the earliest (2004) and best examples of guidelines whereby Irish volunteer-sending organizations are encouraged to pledge to follow eleven basic principles. This not a tourism-related organisation, and their guidelines were designed for international development work.
2. www.atlas-euro.org/sig_volunteer.aspx
3. www.biosphere-expeditions.org/
4. <http://blueventures.org/>

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