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Doing Good in Guatemala: Perceptions of Voluntourism in San Juan Comalapa

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Samantha Hagan

June 2017

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Title: Doing Good in Guatemala: Perceptions of Voluntourism in San Juan Comalapa

Advisor: Dr. Alejandro Cerón

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of host community perceptions of volunteer tourism in the context of a small community in the highlands of Guatemala called San Juan Comalapa. Voluntourism acts as a bridge between development aid and traditional tourism and therefore voluntourism organizations should act as both roles in the community. In this research I found that voluntourism organizations, particularly one organization called Long Way Home, can lean more towards one role than another in the eyes of members of the host community. Based on these findings I recommend that these organizations embrace these dual roles and engage the community as both a development organization as well as tourism operator.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Voluntourism	3
Chapter Two: Literature Review	6
Introduction.....	6
Anthropology of Tourism	7
Anthropology of Development	10
Voluntourism	13
Chapter Three: Setting and Context.....	17
Introduction.....	17
San Juan Comalapa.....	18
Inclusion Criteria of “Voluntourism”	23
Voluntourism Organizations in Comalapa.....	24
Chapter Four: Methods and Ethics	32
Research Design.....	32
Research Question	33
Data Collection	33
Introducing Informants	34
Participant Observation.....	37
Data Analysis.....	39
Ethics and Limitations	40
Chapter Five: Perceptions of Voluntourism	42
Introduction.....	42
Community Role of Voluntourism	43
Volunteer or Tourist.....	44
Institutional Shortcomings	48
Volunteer / Local interactions.....	56
Organization Isolation.....	58
Shaping Comalapa	67
Incentives	68
Conclusion	73

Chapter Six: Voluntourism in the Community	74
Introduction.....	74
Voluntourism as Development	75
Voluntourism and Community Engagement	77
Chapter Seven: Conclusion	82
Bibliography	86

List of Figures

Figure 3.1: First Panel of Murals in Comalapa.....	19
Figure 3.2: Landscape view from Xiquin Sanahi, San Juan Comalapa	20
Figure 3.3: View of the barranco from above.....	21
Figure 3.4: Colonial Church Façade in Comalapa’s main plaza.....	22
Figure 3.5: Entrance of Parque Chimiya, Park built by LWH.....	25
Figure 3.6: Campus of Long Way Home school project, Tecnico Chixot.....	26
Figure 3.7: Classroom at Tecnico Chixot.....	26
Figure 3.8: Map of Comalapa with LWH school campus circled (Google Maps).....	28
Figure 3.9: EWB students measuring piping for project in Xiquin Sanahi	29
Figure 3.10: Statue Honoring Amistad Exchange in Comalapa’s main plaza	30
Figure 5.1: Mural panel with poem	54
Figure 5.2: Market day in Comalapa	56
Figure 5.3: Feria de San Juan procession	58
Figure 5.4: Retaining wall of tires at entrance to LWH campus	59
Figure 5.5: Handmade map of Comalapa from the English Academy	60
Figure 5.6: Dirt Road to LWH school campus	60
Figure 5.7: Pile of recyclable materials for building at LWH	72

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- Sami

Chapter One: Introduction

Our flight left Atlanta, Georgia a few hours ago so I know we should be getting close. It is mid-June, rainy season in Guatemala, hence the thunderstorm outside. My stomach is growling since I did not have dinner before my flight left. As I am watching the constant flashes of lightning out my window with some anxiety, I realize our plane is beginning to circle Guatemala City for the third time. I look at my phone to check the time and begin to worry. The voice of the pilot comes over the intercom and tells us, first in English and then in Spanish, the storm is too severe over the city and we will not be able to land. We are being redirected to El Salvador to wait for the weather to clear up, however long that may be, and then we will make our second attempt (if you do not count the times we circled) at landing at our correct destination. I sit silently trying not to panic since I do not have any way to contact my professor and tell him about this delay. We land in El Salvador and are able to stretch our legs a bit while we wait for what we hope will be a short time.

The woman next to me is blonde, middle-aged, and wearing a neon green T-shirt that I have been trying to avert my eyes from for the duration of the flight. “What brings you to Guatemala?” she asks me, trying to make small talk in hopes of passing the time more quickly. I respond, “Oh, I’m here to do research for school. You?”. She goes into a

long explanation that she is visiting with a group from her church to do mission/volunteer work. It is then that I notice her fluorescent shirt bears the name of her church across the front. I am immediately glad she does not follow up by asking me what my research is about. I ask her where they are working in the country and she laughs and says she does not remember the name but thinks it might be close to Antigua. “Yeah, we’re staying for about 10 days and the last two are going to be just visiting Antigua!”

We chat a bit longer - or rather she talks to me while I anxiously glance at my phone every 30 seconds to check how much time has passed. After about an hour of nodding and uh-huh-ing and shared exchanges of frustration at our idleness, we are finally told we will now be taking off to try landing in Guatemala City once more. By the time we land it is around 11pm and I am both exhausted from my day of travel and full of nervous adrenaline from entering a new country. The passengers of my flight slowly deplane and we walk collectively to the customs gate through long, dimly lit stretches of hallway. The final tiny, winding hallway suddenly opens up to a spacious room full of people waiting in separate lines to be questioned and stamped for entry. There is a line for Guatemalan citizens consisting of mostly individuals or families presumably returning home. The lines for foreigners however are much longer and consist mostly of large groups. As I look around I slowly realize that all of the groups have their own matching T-shirts and see that my seat neighbor has joined her own group of several neon green shirts. It occurs to me that most of the people waiting to enter are also volunteers.

Voluntourism

Volunteer tourism or, as it can also be known, “Voluntourism,” is a popular trend in travel in recent decades. Before tourism became accessible to the masses, young males of means would go on a “Grand Tour,” visiting other countries and seeing the world to demonstrate their worldliness and become “cultured” as a sort of social rite of passage (Smith 1989). An artifact of that old custom, voluntourism trips similarly allow mostly young people the opportunity to boost their resume and their social standing by completing some sort of short-term development project abroad, thus demonstrating their worldliness and humanitarian proclivities. These humanitarian endeavors, however, can have the opposite effect and have been the subject of much controversy recently as people are becoming more aware of the effects of colonialism and “western” hegemony. Because of this controversy surrounding the topic, I wanted to try to understand voluntourism from the perspectives of the people who are the intended beneficiaries of these voluntourism projects.

Volunteers flock to various countries in the global south every year with their church groups, school groups, or on their own as individuals. Guatemala is no exception and when I was deciding where I wanted to study this phenomenon I found countless organizations offering opportunities for enlightenment and development all over the country. I simply chose the location that I did because the voluntourism organization situated there had a project I found interesting. Additionally, because of my thesis advisor’s connections to Guatemala, I already had in-country contacts so it all fell into place.

I have always loved to travel and as an anthropology student, I have also been very aware of the way my actions impact other people in the world. Many of my friends in school took trips to do volunteer work for summer break or spring break and I always saw articles people would share on social media about either the negative impacts or the positive benefits of voluntourism. Hoping to continue my travels in the future, I wanted to know how to be more responsible about the way I travel. If I choose to do volunteer work abroad someday, I want to make sure it is sustainable and truly beneficial for the community.

I chose to research this topic because voluntourism is becoming increasingly popular and it is important to develop good relationships with people who are different from you, especially in this globalized world.

“By encouraging travel, the industry helps to maintain and market the anthropological cross-cultural perspective. In many ways, the travel industry might be viewed as the “real world” anthropology, and it offers increasing opportunities for significant anthropological involvement” (Smith 2008:252).

Travel and tourism encourage people to connect and understand others in ways that are difficult from afar. As anthropologists, I believe we should encourage that and help tourism, in any form, become more beneficial for everyone involved. If people can connect through generosity, like through voluntourism, it is my experience that they respect and appreciate one another. Having the opportunity to research voluntourism then, seemed very important in developing improvements in the industry.

In this ethnography, I hope to convey the perceptions of local Guatemalans about volunteer tourism as I interpreted them. My goal was to have a better understanding of

how recipients of development in the form of voluntourism view those organizations and eventually be able to provide some recommendations to the organizations working in Comalapa based on feedback from the members of the community. Voluntourism is a bridge between development aid and traditional tourism and because of this, voluntourism organizations play various roles in their community and struggle to define their own role with these dual identities.

This thesis is organized into seven chapters, the first of which is this Introduction. Chapter Two will be Setting and Context, where I will introduce the field site, the town of San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala, and give an overview of the volunteer tourism organizations that work in the community. Then in Chapter Three: Literature Review, I will provide a framework using literature from the anthropology of tourism as well as the anthropology of development in which to place my own research. Chapter Four is where I will describe how I designed this project and my methods used to conduct research, as well as ethical considerations. Chapter Five is a discussion of my observations as well as the interview responses from my informants about the role of voluntourism in their community. In Chapter Six I will use the concepts and frameworks set forth in Chapter Three to understand my results and engage my own research with the broader body of anthropological literature. Lastly, in Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Recommendations, I will offer some final thoughts and make recommendations for the voluntourism organizations in Comalapa.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

It has probably come up on your Facebook newsfeed before, a photo of an American college-aged person hugging a small African or Latin American child along with a comment about how rewarding it is to make a difference in someone's life. Conversely, you may have seen one of the many opinion articles about the dangers of voluntourism and the problematization of commodifying children in other countries for one's personal gain (Kushner 2016, Friedman-Rudovsky 2015). The problem with "orphan tourism" being that it can cause mental harm in the children affected and often violates privacy rights of children as well ("Childsafe - Together, Protecting Children" 2017).

Tourism and development have always been intertwined, but recently with the rise in popularity of volunteer tourism, they have become synonymous. Tourism can either be seen as a bringer of development because of an influx of tourist money and interest, or as development itself as people traveling to do development projects on their vacation. More and more tourists are choosing to spend their vacations volunteering on development projects in non-traditional tourist destinations rather than lounging on a beach. Although it looks increasingly different from what we could call traditional

tourism, voluntourism is still primarily talked about as a form of tourism rather than a form of development. To have a full understanding of what voluntourism truly is and how it functions in host communities, it is first important to understand why people travel at all and how development functions to begin with, as well as orient oneself within the debates of voluntourism. In this chapter I will explore the definition of voluntourism, the controversy surrounding it and how it fits in with both ideas of tourism and ideas of development separately but also overlapping the two fields.

Anthropology of Tourism

To understand voluntourism completely, we have to understand the basics of the study of tourism and how anthropologists have studied tourism in the past. In doing so, I can more easily situate my own research within the field and use the theoretical frameworks of anthropology of tourism to guide my analysis. In this section I will provide an overview of the anthropology of tourism and the different theoretical approaches, controversies, and positions as well as explain how “tourism” became alternative tourism.

It is impossible to discuss the anthropology of tourism without first mentioning Valene Smith and the role that she played bringing tourism in as a legitimate field of study within Anthropology. Previously thought to be frivolous and unimportant as a field of study, tourism became a serious subject to research after the presentation of Valene Smith’s research in the 1970s. Her book, *Hosts and Guests*, introduced an understanding of why people travel and what the purpose of tourism is. “A journey is seldom without

purpose, but culturally-specific values determine the goals of travel” (Smith 1989:28). Smith describes travel as a form of rebirth. When you travel it is to escape your daily life and have new and different experiences. These experiences then shape your identity so when you return home after travel it is as if you are inheriting a dead person’s estate because you have been changed by your travels. Once you have traveled, you are no longer the same person and the process of travel and tourism is thus a sacred, spiritual journey through which you become reborn (Smith 1989).

Peter Burns reinforces this idea that tourism has a spiritual meaning. Burns describes travel as a means of marking time since people typically take a vacation at around the same time each year and thus the taking of a trip demarcates that that specific amount of time has passed. Without taking that trip people can begin to feel worn down by their daily lives and lost in time (Burns 1999). He also aligns with Smith in that he describes tourism as a way to achieve self-realization. With the marking of time comes reflection and thinking about the time that has passed.

Alternatively, Burns examines tourism as a form of imperialistic exploitation. He says “tourism is a totem of freedom” because to be a tourist you must have social and economic freedom, so having that ability to travel automatically implies that you will be socially accepted wherever you go and can afford to go at all (Burns 1999:76). So then tourism becomes people of means traveling to places and having power over the people whom are being “toured.” “Transactions with local people are inherently unequal and it is this inequality that frames the relationship between hosts and guests” (Burns 1999:78). Those economic disparities can create feelings of superiority in tourists, just like

colonialism, which is one of the main critiques of tourism and especially volunteer tourism (Burns 1999:78). This relates back to the idea of dependency and the idea that there is “a direct parallel between the extent of a country’s historical structural conditioning as a colony and the presence of foreign capital” (Britton 1982:352).

Traditional tourism can also have its advantages and disadvantages. Although it is generally acknowledged that tourism can bring development and economic opportunity, sometimes the detrimental aspects of that development outweigh the benefits. “The influences of colonialism ... have usually far outweighed the role of tourism in effecting economic and social change” (Smith 2001:108). Even when a place tries to introduce sustainable forms of tourism into contemporary tourism, “it is difficult because of the widespread ignorance of the realities of tourism” (Smith 2001:191). Many tourists are completely unaware of the impact they have on host communities, or generally assume that any impact is positive because they are spending their money there.

Aside from the controversy, tourism can be a useful tool for development in some cases. “Today, there is an increasing consensus that development is not about economic goals alone, but should also include political, social, and cultural aspects” (Alvarez 2014:91). Alvarez says development can include many things and often tourism is useful for improving quality of life and increasing social capital in the community (2014). The many issues associated with tourism, however, have pushed the industry to seek sustainable solutions, which have led to forms of alternative tourism.

Alternative tourism includes many different styles of travel such as ecotourism, voluntourism, backpacking, and more. Eventually, once people began realizing the

negative effects tourism had on host communities and on the Earth's resources, "in the face of the perils that consumption presented to sustainable livelihoods, instead of viewing the consumers as the problem, they would be converted into the solution" (Baptista 2012:639). Less consumptive alternatives, and thus "alternative tourism," were made to alleviate the effects of traditional tourism and that manifested in various ways. To reduce the impact on the environment, ecotourism was created in order to help environmentally conscious travelers feel less guilty about vacationing. Alternative tourism is a potential solution, if done correctly, to the previous problems associated with tourism, but the key is doing it correctly.

Anthropology of Development

Development is a broad term that can encompass many activities and is difficult to define. For this section I will attempt to define development in the way that I will use it throughout this thesis, to better frame voluntourism within the world of development, and show the relationship between tourism and development. To define development, first I will explain the difference between Development and development. According to Hart, Development with a "big D," refers to intervention "in the 'third world' that emerged in the context of decolonization and the Cold War" whereas "little d" development is defined as "the development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of historical processes" (Hart 2001:650). For the purposes of my discussion in this thesis I will be referring to the "big D" Development definition when I use the term "development."

Gardner and Lewis give a brief history of development, starting with the Enlightenment and going through the present. They present the idea that with the first designation of “underdeveloped” nations versus “developed” nations, huge areas of the world became labeled as being less than the western countries. Immediately, there was a problem in that powerful western countries set forth the idea of development and the rest of the world was expected to follow their example to become “developed” (Gardner and Lewis 2015). This ignored all other cultural identities, histories, and understandings of how the world was supposed to be, and told everyone to center their goals on becoming just like the western powers imposing capitalism on the rest of the world. Thus, right from the start, the development industry had the same connotation as colonialism and capitalism (Gardner and Lewis 2015). With that immediate demarcation of who is the model and who is expected to become like the model, a power dynamic was created and has persisted even through the present.

As the result of this power dynamic, “it became acceptable for rulers to subject their own populations to an infinite variety of interventions” (Escobar 2012:52). The idea of development as economic growth has generally persisted in the industry as the main focus. Included in this idea that development is growth is that experiencing growth means a country will also experience “technological sophistication, urbanization, high levels of consumption, and a range of social and cultural changes” (Gardner and Lewis 2015:13). During the 1970s and 1980s people became more focused on “poverty reduction” than modernization and industrialization, followed by the increased awareness about the environment and climate change in the 1990s (Gardner and Lewis 2015).

After the 1990s, the two main theories of development, modernization theory - the theory that societies are on an evolutionary line, the end point of which is 'modernization' meaning industrialized and focused on cash-cropping and urbanization rather than subsistence farming - and dependency theory - the theory that development is an unequalizing process that encourages imperial and post-imperial exploitation - had been discredited and thought to have been "largely over" (Gardner and Lewis 2015:27). Post-modernist theories and approaches soon took the place of the previous frameworks through which to view development and people began being aware of generalization and more reflexive in the way they studied development. Post-9/11 development, then, looked very different than before in that it focused on befriending the other in order to prevent hostility, the Millennium Development Goals were set forth by the United Nations, and anthropologists had to ask themselves who was setting these goals and why (Gardner and Lewis 2015:40).

This is where development agencies and NGOs become part of the system of development. Now it is mostly NGOs, nonprofits and voluntourists who are the ones perpetuating the processes of developing the "third world". "In the intervening decades NGOs have grown in number and reach to become normalized as global actors" (Richard 2016:6). "Poverty is, first and foremost, a social relationship, the result of inequality, marginalization, and disempowerment" (Gardner and Lewis 2015:45). NGOs still used economic growth as a measure of progress and success in development, linking development projects to neoliberal goals and ideologies (Gardner and Lewis 2015).

NGOs and development organizations are now focusing more on giving marginalized peoples a place at the table to make decisions and to be empowered, but this is still a new concept. In Korten's discussion of the three generations of NGO strategies, most organizations are beginning to refocus their strategies on becoming more sustainable, and part of doing so is focusing more on the national systems at work and less on being involved directly in the villages or community level (1987:149). "Many voices must be heard in shaping the directions of a nation's development, and NGOs have every right - indeed the obligation - to give voice to their values and experience" (Korten 1987:156).

Voluntourism

Voluntourism is an interesting concept because it combines the traditional concept of tourism with that of development. Suddenly, anyone can be a development aid worker for a week or a month with no prior experience and on any number of tasks. However, because voluntourism has opened up development work to anyone anywhere, it has been the subject of some controversy regarding whether it is actually ethical. Of course there are the stories of the western volunteers building a school and the local workers tearing it down to rebuild it at night so that it is done correctly, or of the water pump being built in the center of a village but women continuing to walk for miles to fetch water and the pump sits unused. If not done properly, voluntourism can actually waste resources rather than provide them.

“In reality, what has been at stake in most debates about volunteer tourism is not whether the help of Westerners has any relevance in the development of poor nations, but whether these Westerners possess the necessary capacities and motivations to produce effective help” (Palacios 2010:863).

People believe that voluntourism can be unnecessary and a waste of time when we should instead be donating money to the community to let them do things themselves. Others say at least people are trying to help and have good intentions.

Additionally, many people say that voluntourism is an extension of colonialism, bestowing our “help” onto the less fortunate “third world” and in exchange western countries can control some of the resources in that place. The U.S. has these programs in Latin America and Europe has them in Africa and parts of Asia, particularly in countries that previously were colonized or controlled by the country that is now sending volunteers there. Still others believe it is simply a tool for building social capital.

Now I will give a brief history of voluntourism and how it became what it is today. Travelling to other countries to volunteer is not new but paying money to do so is. Voluntourism started to really become popular as late as the 1990s, around the same time that other forms of alternative tourism like backpacking and ecotourism were catching on (Garland 2012). Now it has become one of the most popular ways to travel, where the market had grown to 1.6 million volunteer tourists a year, with an estimated value of US\$1.7–2.6 billion as of 2008 (Bailey and Russell 2012). Based on the idea of the gap year, taking a year off between high school and college, voluntourism was a chance for mostly young people to see some of the world and do something useful that would set them apart from their peers later on. The key aspects of what made voluntourism so

successful was that NGOs received free labor, volunteers received the opportunity to contribute to society, and tour operators could connect the two, making virtually everyone involved a winner (Garland 2012).

Now we can begin to discuss the controversy. Voluntourism has the potential to be extremely beneficial and “is basically a pain-free mechanism for redistributing global resources, one that betters the world” (Garland 2012:6). In many cases, it can be helpful for host communities, especially when it is contributing skilled labor in a sustainable way. Additionally, it can help allocate resources to people who do not have the means to do a project themselves. When volunteers have to pay fees, especially for smaller organizations, those fees often go towards supplies and resources for the organization. Long Way Home, for example, charges a fee for volunteers and the money from those fees “ help sustain LWH and pay for materials and labor at the school” (LWH Volunteer Manual 2016:8).

This power can also be abused. Volunteers providing donations and time often have a stake in what projects actually come to fruition. Joao Baptista describes this as “ethical consumption” which is “legitimizing new modes of governance by nongovernmental agents” (2012:640). In other words, volunteers and “ethical tourists” are undermining local governance by donating and determining what their donation will go toward. By donating to a specific organization, they can determine what projects come about in the community and who has the authority to complete them.

One of the goals of voluntourism is to encourage cross-cultural communication and interaction. While volunteering in many places, people are working alongside

members of the local host community but there can be barriers to meaningful interaction such as language differences or social rules about certain groups interacting. “Critics posit that volunteer tourism may promote rationalization of poverty, initiate undesirable cultural changes within host communities, and result in cross-cultural misunderstanding due to the lack of close and informative interaction” (Kirillova, Lehto and Cai 2015:383). Without addressing these issues, volunteers and locals will not only miss out on the cross-cultural experience intended but it could actually deepen social divides and begin cultural shifts that are not acceptable in that community.

So far, in the study of this subject, “Participants in volunteer tourism received the most attention in the scholarly literature” rather than the host communities (Kirillova, Lehto and Cai 2015:384). For this reason, I chose to focus on voluntourism from the perspectives of the host community. In conclusion, notions of what constitutes development and what is considered tourism have changed immensely over the last several decades. Through these changes and with the intertwining of the two, voluntourism has come to be one of the most popular forms of both tourism and development. Using this literature to frame my research, I have sufficient background information about tourism and development to carefully place my results within the context of these concepts.

Chapter Three: Setting and Context

Introduction

In the highlands of Guatemala, about one hour from the capital city, is where I lived for two months right in the center of town. At the end of a winding mountain road, with views overlooking canyons and *milpas* (corn fields), you see walls lined with colorful murals and a small church on a hill, and a shadowed outline of a volcano in the rearview mirror. The town is small enough that I could easily walk from end to end of the municipality and even walk to the smaller villages surrounding town (if I was willing to endure some steep up and downhill climbs). It is in this setting that I conducted my research during the summer of 2016.

In this chapter I will introduce the municipality of San Juan Comalapa and the volunteer tourism organizations working there. This chapter will include an introduction and description of San Juan Comalapa's demographics as well as environmental characteristics. Then I will provide a brief definition of volunteer tourism and how I chose this particular location and the organization that drew me there to conduct my research. Lastly, I will introduce each of the voluntourism organizations currently working in San Juan Comalapa that are engaged in ongoing projects, specifically

focusing on the organization Long Way Home because they have a continuous and long-term presence in the community.

San Juan Comalapa

San Juan Comalapa is a small municipality in the western highlands of Guatemala. It is only an hour and a half bus ride to the capital city and three-hour bus ride to Lake Atitlán. The population is close to 40,000 and 97% of those 40,000 are ethnically considered indigenous Maya. Most people there speak both Kaqchikel and Spanish and the women mostly wear the traditional Mayan clothing comprised of the huipil (shirt) and corte (skirt). Most people in Comalapa make their living from agriculture, shipping their produce to be sold in the US (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de Municipio de San Juan Comalapa 2010).

Comalapa is known for its history as the birthplace of famous artist Andres Curruchich as well as the composer of the Guatemalan national anthem, Rafael Alvarez Ovalle. There are several art galleries scattered throughout the town, three music schools, and the Casa de la Cultura, which features artifacts from Ovalle's life and career. There are murals lining the walls on the main road as you enter the city that depict the history of the town. Comalapa is very much an artistic city that embraces their arts identity.



Figure 3.1 - First panel of murals in Comalapa (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

Comalapa is also a relatively poor municipality. As of 2010, 57% of the community members are in poverty, 10% are in extreme poverty and only 33% are not poor (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de Municipio de San Juan Comalapa 2010). Additionally, the rate of illiteracy in people over the age of 15 in Comalapa is about 24% and there is only one *Diversificado* (high school) level school in the municipality, in the urban center (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de Municipio de San Juan Comalapa 2010). This means it is much more difficult for people living in the surrounding 12 aldeas to reach the *Diversificado* level in school. The rate of illiteracy is likely so high because of the high drop out rate, low school coverage in the *Basico* and *Diversificado* levels, and the need for students to quit school at an early age in order to work for their families (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de Municipio de San Juan Comalapa 2010).



Figure 3.2 - Landscape view from Xiquin Sanahi, San Juan Comalapa (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

The natural landscape in the area in which Comalapa is situated is beautiful and very green. There are four different volcanoes visible from town and several hills and mountains. There are several natural *nacimientos de agua*, or springs and small streams and rivers in the area. The people in Comalapa say there are only two seasons, rainy season and dry season. Rainy season is during summer and fall months and dry season is during winter and spring (according to northern hemisphere seasons). While I was in Comalapa, I experienced heavy downpours and a few earthquake tremors caused by nearby volcanic rumblings.

There are not many options for waste disposal in Comalapa. They do not have a community trash pick-up or recycling pick-up so instead, people throw their trash into one of the *barrancos* in the middle of town. The *barrancos* are gorges / cliffs into which people dispose of everything from broken car parts to food scraps. The *barranco* regularly catches fire because of all the chemicals and gases coming from the waste and it attracts stray dogs, mice, rats, and insects. The largest *barranco* is directly in the center of town, not by choice of course, because it is a natural feature just being used for this purpose. There is also trash on the streets that people have simply tossed aside while walking since there are no public trash bins or recycling bins.



Figure 3.3 - View of the barranco from above (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

The town of Comalapa is around 7,000 ft. in elevation, with slightly higher elevations in the surrounding aldeas. The abundance of volcanoes means this area experiences many earthquakes and tremors, most notably the earthquake of 1976, which completely leveled the city and many other locations in Guatemala. Many concrete slabs on the sidewalks of the town have “1976” etched into them because so much had to be rebuilt immediately after the big earthquake. Even the main colonial church in the central plaza was closed because of damages and a functional church with the same name, San Juan Bautista, was built immediately next to it.



Figure 3.4 - Colonial church facade in Comalapa's main plaza (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

Around the same time as the earthquake, the Armed Conflict in Guatemala that targeted indigenous peoples across the country took its toll on Comalapa and the surrounding 12 aldeas. There are monuments and murals dedicated to honoring the victims of the conflict both in Comalapa and the aldeas. Many people still talk about the conflict and just recently countless people received closure after having their loved ones' remains returned to them to be reburied. In one of the aldeas, Xiquin Sanahi, forensic anthropologists identified some people's family members in mass graves and they were able to rebury them (Miller 2003). After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, development agencies flocked to Guatemala to begin projects and thus began the influx of volunteers.

Inclusion Criteria of "Voluntourism"

Lyons and Wearing define "volunteer tourists as those who volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve the aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment" (2008:240).

Based on this definition, I added my own criteria as well when looking for an organization to focus on and choosing my location for research. In addition to the definition above, I included organizations that charge a fee to volunteer with them, provide housing for their volunteers, do not have projects in multiple countries (to keep my project focused on a smaller-scale organization), and offer short-term stays. I defined short-term as anywhere between a one week visit and three months. Using these criteria, I

chose to focus on Latin America because I speak Spanish, and Guatemala specifically because that is where my thesis advisor is originally from.

Voluntourism Organizations in Comalapa

Long Way Home

Long Way Home is a nonprofit voluntourism organization that was established in 2004 by a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer who had been stationed in Comalapa during his service. Once he founded the organization, he focused on a park construction project in Comalapa, partnering with a local organization called Chuwi Tinamit. After the park was completed, “area residents began coming to LWH for help with other endeavors” (LWH Volunteer Manual 2016:3). In 2009 LWH began their next project, which was a primary and vocational school using sustainable building methods such as including recycled materials and rammed-earth. The school opened in 2012 and was supposed to be completed by 2016 but had not yet been completed when I was there during the summer of 2016.



Figure 3.5 - Entrance of Parque Chimiya, Park built by LWH (Photo: Long Way Home)



Figure 3.6 - Campus of Long Way Home school project, Tecnico Chixot (Photo: Samantha Hagan)



Figure 3.7 - Classroom at Tecnico Chixot (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

The administrative staff is all American “gringos” who tend to stay on staff for relatively short amounts of time. The volunteer handbook I was given for the week I volunteered was the 2015-2016 handbook but three of the seven staff members listed in it were no longer working there and one was transitioning out when I arrived. All of the construction team as well as the schoolteachers are local Comalapenses.

Typically LWH hosts anywhere from 1 to 20 volunteers at once, more if they come as a group together from somewhere and work on any of the projects at LWH. They have the park project, which they maintain and is where the volunteer housing is located, the school project called Técnico Chixot, Environmental Education and English Classes lead on either the school campus or in the park, and a reforestation project, which is currently dormant (LWH Volunteer Manual 2016:7). While I volunteered there, I participated in construction of the new section of the school, and the seven other volunteers there at the same time also worked on construction. No one was working on the other projects to my knowledge during that time.

The park and the site of the school are located outside of the center of Comalapa. It is close to a 12-minute walk to the school campus from the central plaza and is accessed via dirt road in either direction. The roads lead through agricultural fields and the campus is tucked away into a hillside. As you approach the campus, there is a large retaining wall built out of recycled car and truck tires filled with dirt and small trash items like food wrappers and rubber strips. Because so much of the school is built in this style, it is commonly referred to around town as “La Escuela de Llantas” meaning “The Tire School”.

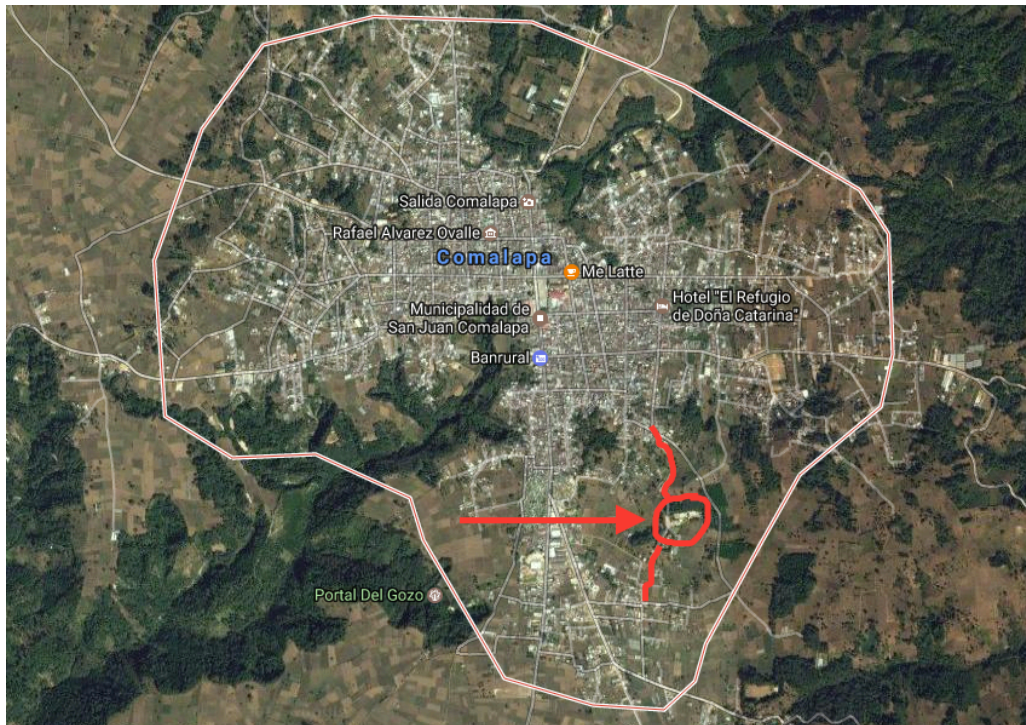


Figure 3.8 - Map of Comalapa with LWH school campus circled (Photo: Google Maps)

Engineers Without Borders

Although my main focus was on Long Way Home, there were other volunteer organizations working in the municipality on development projects at the same time as LWH. One of these is the organization Engineers Without Borders – USA. Engineers Without Borders (EWB) is a nonprofit humanitarian organization that connects with developing communities to provide infrastructural design work in a sustainable way. The organization was officially founded in 2002 by an engineering professor at the University of Colorado – Boulder and the first project was a water supply system in San Pablo,

Belize. Since then they have grown to an organization of more than 16,800 members, with student chapters and professional chapters all over the United States.



Figure 3.9 - EWB students measuring piping for project in Xiquin Sanahi (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

EWB has had ongoing development projects in Comalapa through the student chapter at the University of Minnesota for several years now. While I was there, they were implementing a water distribution system in the aldea Xiquin Sanahi. Because the village is set on a mountain, the students designed a gravity-fed pipe system to lead from the nacimiento de agua (natural spring) down to each of the 60 or so homes in Xiquin. While working there, the students were staying at a home used as a hotel in the central

part of town. I acted as a translator for the students and the members of the Community Development Council (COCODE) in Xiquin.

Amistad - Norway Exchange

Another organization periodically working in Comalapa was the Amistad exchange group from Norway. Amistad means friendship and for a few decades, San Juan Comalapa has had a partnership with a town in Norway. As part of the partnership they have alternated hosting each other for a visit. The Norwegians have come to Comalapa now several times and some people from Comalapa have gone to Norway many times as well. As a part of this exchange, the Norwegians have done several development projects in Comalapa over the years and donate money for projects to the municipal government.



Figure 3.10 - Statue honoring the Amistad exchange in Comalapa's main plaza (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

Their projects include establishing a music school (which eventually closed) and a recycling center that takes recyclable materials, compacts them, and sends them to the capital city. This recycling center pays people by weight of what they are recycling and is located right next door to my Señora's home in the center of town. This exchange is an obviously important part of this community. There is a statue honoring the exchange in the main plaza, directly across the street from the municipal government building.

Peace Corps

It is worth mentioning briefly that the United States Peace Corps has a corps member stationed in Comalapa and has for quite some time. There is only one corps member and currently, she is working in the Superintendent's office, doing health and hygiene education in the schools around Comalapa. She occasionally also teaches fitness classes in the gymnasium at the school located on the main plaza in town. Although the Peace Corps is a long-term commitment of two years minimum, I still consider this a form of volunteer tourism since it is temporary and corps members' projects are typically given to them by the Peace Corps.

Chapter Four: Methods and Ethics

Research Design

This chapter describes my research design for this project as well as the theoretical framework within which I have been working. My thesis is an exploratory ethnography using mixed methods. My main research methods were semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I conducted eight face-to-face interviews with community members in San Juan Comalapa occupying various roles in the community, usually some form of leadership role or role as employee for one of the voluntourism organizations in Comalapa. Additionally, my fieldnotes from participant observation were the result of living in Comalapa for two months over the summer including one and a half weeks volunteering for the voluntourism organization called Long Way Home (LWH) and another week with Engineers Without Borders - USA (EWB). My goal in this research was to explore host community members' perceptions of volunteer tourism and its role in Comalapa. This chapter will discuss my methods, positionality, and ethics while completing my research.

Research Question

My main research question was the following:

What role do voluntourism organizations play in Comalapa, according to members of the host community?

Data Collection

My data collection took place over a eight week period in June, July, and August of 2016. I spent these two months living in San Juan Comalapa, Guatemala with a local host, taking Spanish language courses, and volunteering with an English Language Academy in the community as well as two voluntourism organizations for one week each. This time was spent gathering information through participant observation and interviews with community members. My experience volunteering with these different organizations while also living in Comalapa with a well-known community member gave me access to many different people. Señora helped me build rapport in the community by bringing me to the market with her, introducing me to artists at their galleries, and inviting me to participate in community events. However, because I was only able to conduct my research over a short period of time, I used an applied approach for rapid assessment (Bernard 2006:352).

Informants were selected through convenience sampling (Bernard 2006:191) based on who was available to speak with me or I could easily access. I chose to do nonprobability sampling because of my time restraints, which would have made it difficult to interview a probability sample. “Most studies of narratives are based on fewer

than 50 cases,” so because I knew I would have limited time and thus fewer cases, this method seemed appropriate (Bernard 2006:186). I always obtained verbal informed consent before beginning an interview and provided the informants with contact information and an outline of my project goals in case they had further questions.

While in the community I interviewed several people both informally and formally. I conducted eight formal semi-structured interviews but only six of those were audio recorded; two of those I interviewed denied my request to record aside from written notes. All eight interviews were face-to-face and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. I employed neutral probing and probing by leading to encourage informants to speak more in-depth during my interviews (Bernard 2006:220). Since a translator assisted me with my interviews, I was also aware of the Third-Party-Present effect (Bernard 2006:243) and how the presence of my translator could have also affected the answers informants gave.

Introducing Informants

My inclusion criteria were 1) Leadership role in Comalapa either governmental, organizational, or social 2) Knowledge of LWH’s existence. Originally I had intended to interview multiple community leaders as well as multiple employees of the voluntourism organization Long Way Home, however this was not possible. I instead interviewed one employee from LWH and two sets of parents whose children attend the school at LWH so that I could still get the perspectives of people who are connected and involved with LWH’s projects.

Additionally, I attempted to interview the Mayor of Comalapa but he did not have time to speak with me and directed me instead to interview the members of the Comalapa Tourism Council. The rest of my informants were community leaders in that they were involved in some kind of leadership role in the community and had connections to many people. My key informant and translator, whom I refer to as Humberto, is the founder and teacher of a small English Language Academy in Comalapa. I have given all informants a pseudonym or refer to them by their occupation. For more insight into the backgrounds of my informants, I will introduce them each briefly below.

Humberto - Key Informant and Translator, Founder and teacher at English Language Academy where I was taking Spanish classes and sitting in on English classes in the evenings. Humberto is not originally from Comalapa but his wife is and he has lived there for about 10 years. He is in his late twenties and has two children. Because he runs the English Academy and offers Spanish classes to gringos, occasionally he has worked with some volunteers and staff from LWH, so I thought he might be able to connect me with some of the workers there as well.

Viviana and Marco, Jose and Marta - Parents of children attending Long Way Home's school, somewhat marginalized in that they lived on the very edge of town and proclaimed that they were very poor. Both sets of parents had more than one student attending LWH and were "more indigenous" than most of my other informants. I mean

more indigenous by the fact that they spoke Kaqchikel as their first language and wore the traditional indigenous dress.

Señora - Key informant and my host whom I lived with for the duration of the summer in Comalapa. She is not from Comalapa originally but moved here at a young age and is now 70 years old. She was a teacher and then principal at one of the private schools in Comalapa and now is retired. In her retirement she is the head of the board at the Casa de la Cultura and helps out with one of the youth band groups. Every time I mentioned to anyone around town that I was staying with her they immediately knew whom I was talking about and where she lived since she is active in the community and lives near the center of town.

Builder - Sustainable builder at LWH, the only LWH employee I was able to talk to. He is in his mid-twenties and has worked at LWH off and on throughout the past several years. I asked him to put me in touch with some of the other workers there but he seemed very uneasy during our interview and I did not want to press the issue and cause even more discomfort. I met him during the week that I volunteered at LWH and we worked together every day. Also his brother attended the English Language Academy where I was helping out during my stay.

Superintendent - Superintendent of schools in Comalapa, Has lived in Comalapa his entire life and is in his mid-fifties. Since LWH is part of the school system in Comalapa, I

thought it would be useful to learn about his interactions with the organization and how he views them and their projects. Because he knows LWH more from a development side through his work, I believed his perceptions of the organization would be different than others.

Tourism Council Members - Group of four men, work on the Tourism Council for the municipality of Comalapa, all look to be middle-aged. I was interested to interview them to see the view of LWH from the tourism perspective and to learn about their perceptions of voluntourism in general. They were the only ones who requested that I not audio record the interview but allowed me to take written notes during it.

All of these individuals had different perspectives on voluntourism and came from varying backgrounds but had many similar things to say about LWH specifically and their role in the community.

Participant Observation

Aside from interviews, I also acted as a participant observer. My participant observation began as soon as I arrived in Guatemala, from the moment I stepped off the plane and there were masses of volunteer groups in line to pass through Customs. Upon arrival in San Juan Comalapa, I tried to quickly solidify a routine so that I could establish myself in the community and meet new people. I began taking Spanish language classes in the mornings at a Language Academy in exchange for helping to teach the afternoon

and evening English classes three days a week. The Academy hosted an English Club on Monday evenings for students to practice speaking with native English speakers. Some volunteers and staff from Long Way Home would attend as well as the U.S. Peace Corps volunteer posted in Comalapa. I took notes during most of these classes and always during the English Club meetings. My Spanish classes and the English classes in the afternoons and evenings were continuous throughout my entire two month stay and provided some structure and ways of meeting people and becoming more familiar around town.

My first week in Comalapa was a hectic one since I arrived during the Feria de San Juan, the patron saint of San Juan Comalapa. It was extremely difficult to learn my way around and start being able to navigate the city on my own because of all the booths and crowded streets. I did not go out and about much alone my first week because it was overwhelming and I was afraid I would get too lost. After the first week and the end of the feria, I started regularly going to the market on market days, which happened three days out of the week, to observe who was there, what people were selling and to also make myself visible to the community members and hopefully make them more comfortable with my presence. On my days off from classes at the Academy, I would catch up on my field notes, study Spanish, and wander around some part of town or go get coffee in a small coffee shop right off the main plaza.

One week in July during my field research I signed up to volunteer at LWH in order to see the interactions between volunteers and local workers and to also make relationships with the local workers in hopes of interviewing some of them. I worked

only in the mornings before lunch each day so that I could still go to the English classes in the evenings. I tried to divide my time somewhat equally between socializing with other volunteers and with the builders so that I could talk to both and also see how each group treated each other and me differently. During my last week in Comalapa I volunteered as a translator for the EWB group coming to do a water distribution project in the aldea Xiquin Sanahi. I wanted the opportunity to see how a shorter-term voluntourism organization was received and how they completed their project with the community. EWB and LWH had very different approaches to their projects and demonstrated different versions of what voluntourism can be.

Data Analysis

Once I returned from Guatemala, I compiled my field notes in their various forms (log, diary, jottings, extended) and transcribed my interviews. I chose to use a grounded-theory approach because inductive coding made sense to use for this exploratory research (Bernard 2006:493). Once everything had been compiled I began looking through the documents for emerging themes. After I had identified some emerging themes I coded for those themes, pulling excerpts that would support them. I identified themes by looking for repetition of words, phrases, or ideas across interviews and field notes, as well as analyzing similarities and differences between them. I made an outline of those codes and used that to begin writing my results.

Ethics and Limitations

When working in a small community in an historically marginalized municipality, there are several ethical questions that arise. In completing this research I tried to limit my interaction with the staff of LWH and stay mostly focused on the rest of the community, to distance myself from the organization and prevent my informants from believing I would be reporting back everything they told me. This was especially difficult because this community had very few gringos that were not directly involved with either LWH or another volunteer organization like Peace Corps or EWB. I was automatically grouped as a volunteer because of my nationality and appearance, as well as the fact that I was only there short-term. In this thesis I use the term “gringo/gringa” to refer to foreigners in Comalapa because that is how Comalapenses referred to them and to demonstrate how people were all lumped together as foreigners regardless of any other characteristics.

There is also still a lot of distrust within the indigenous community in Comalapa because of the disappearances and murders of indigenous peoples during the Civil Conflict in Guatemala through the 1990s. I tried to be mindful of this and avoided bringing up this topic in case it was traumatic for people to discuss. I only engaged in conversation about it if someone else raised the subject to me on their own.

My main ethical concerns in this project were my use of a translator and my own positionality. In using a translator I was afraid that people would not be as truthful for fear of judgment or lack of privacy, and I was also afraid that my translator would not keep confidential the responses of my informants. I explained to him before conducting

any interviews that the responses of informants were to be kept confidential and private and that he should not talk about them to anyone but me. However, it is difficult to know, especially now that I am no longer there, whether he will keep his word or not. Now that I have taken so many Spanish classes and I feel more confident in my own Spanish skills, I believe in the future I will not need a translator to accompany me to talk with people if I return.

Additionally, because of my position as a white, American person, I felt at times like people were appeasing me by answering my questions. There are still a lot of tensions between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Guatemala and since the community of Comalapa is close to 95% indigenous according to their municipal development plan (2010), I was wary of my race or nationality and the cultural power it has influencing how people talked to me and whether or not they did. Especially since all of the administrative staff at LWH are white Americans, I was automatically associated with them, which is why I believe more builders at LWH did not want to be interviewed. With this limited access, I did not get to interview as many employees of LWH as I had hoped to and since I had limited time, I had to talk with people who were more readily available and willing to talk.

Chapter Five: Results

Introduction

I was interested in the host community members' views of volunteer tourism because of the long-term presence of LWH mixed with varied visits from other volunteers with other organizations. Throughout my conversations, people emphasized the importance of the volunteers and their work as well as their gratitude in having those organizations in town. Most showed enthusiasm in wanting the help and guidance the staff and volunteers at these organizations could provide. This enthusiasm and gratitude prompted me to believe these organizations must have a prominent role in the community. My observations and other discussions however, showed that this might not be the case. Programs and projects are still highly incentivized and show close association with the specific causes and ideas of the organizations themselves. Most people I asked did not know much about the organizations unless they were directly involved with them.

My goal was to understand how people truly view voluntourism in their community and what role it plays in both bringing tourism to Comalapa and as a development organization. In the following sections I will explore the themes of volunteers as developers, institutional shortcomings, incentives, development priorities, isolation, and lack of engagement.

Community Role of Voluntourism

Non-governmental organizations whose focus is volunteer tourism play an interesting role in countries around the world. They present a form of alternative tourism for travelers seeking a more virtuous or off-the-beaten-path travel experience but also have the ability to make decisions about development projects and community engagement. Sometimes these projects even occur without the involvement of the local government. “NGOs have alternately been lauded as tools for empowering the poor and disenfranchised and critiqued as accomplices in the creation of non-elected forms of neoliberal governance” (Richard 2016). Instead of being community driven, volunteer organizations can be criticized for being an “initiative of international development professionals” (Baptista 2012).

In San Juan Comalapa, it seems as though it can be both. Many projects that the various volunteer tourism organizations do in the community are in fact community driven, but rather than coming from the government, the projects often come from the residents of the town. The Engineers Without Borders project I assisted with as a translator in one of the aldeas around Comalapa was a project requested specifically by the community members and managed by the community development council. The engineers from the U.S. made decisions about the design of the project and scope but the idea for the project itself came from the locals. Conversely, the projects created by Long Way Home and the Amistad group were the product of outsider ideas of what the community needed after staying in the community over time.

From water distribution to affordable education and waste management, volunteers are making infrastructural improvements throughout the town mostly without

the involvement of the municipal government. After several interviews with various community members ranging from teachers to government officials to concerned parents, and observations from volunteering with two separate volunteer organizations, it became clear that community members view volunteer tourism as a necessity in their community for completing infrastructural projects. In this section I will describe the role of volunteers in developing Comalapa according to “Comalapenses” themselves.

Volunteer or Tourist

As I walked to the line for customs in the Guatemala City Airport on the evening I arrived, I noticed several large groups wearing matching shirts, clustered together in line. These groups were volunteer tourists. I knew this because the passenger next to me on the plane told me she was there to volunteer for a week with her church group and I saw her standing with one of the matching clusters. From the moment I arrived in Guatemala, I knew there were more people from my American flight there to volunteer than to simply visit. The sheer number of volunteer tourists from my flight alone was shocking but the longer my stay in Guatemala, the more common it seemed.

One afternoon during my first week in Comalapa, I was wandering the streets, trying to get a better understanding of the layout of the town and I stopped to look in one of the artisan shops filled with the hand-woven textiles that are so well known in Guatemala. I was examining some placemats when whom I assumed was the shop owner, an older woman wearing the traditional huipil and corte, approached me and asked “Eres voluntaria?” It seems that because I was a “gringa” in a town with very few gringos, her

first assumption was not that I was a tourist, but that I was a volunteer. Similarly, when Señora accompanied me to one of the art galleries and introduced me, again the first question from the gallery owner, Elena, was “Are you a volunteer?” Volunteer work is so much more common in Comalapa than simply being a tourist that it was more natural to assume that I was there to work rather than to visit and see all that Comalapa has to offer.

This was a common occurrence. Any time I met someone new in or around Comalapa, the assumption was that I was there to volunteer and that was the first question I received. When I traveled the first weekend I was in Guatemala to the capital city with Señora to visit her brother and sister, I arrived there to also meet her daughter and a young French woman whom she had brought along for the weekend. Señora’s daughter introduced us, saying, “She is volunteering in Santiago Atitlan, doing fashion design with a nonprofit organization there. Where are you volunteering?” Again, the immediate assumption was that I was there to volunteer and when I explained that I was in Comalapa for my school research I was met with surprise and interest.

Another weekend Señora and I went to visit her daughter and the small town of Santiago Atitlan. To get there, it is easiest to first take the bus into Panajachel since it is a larger, more popular destination, and then take a ferry across Lake Atitlan to one of the smaller lake towns. We took the bus into Panajachel and wandered the streets shopping and looking for a place to eat lunch. While walking around the town it was clear that this was the main destination for tourists wanting to visit Lake Atitlan. There were gringos everywhere, the most I had seen since arriving in Guatemala. They walked through the markets in pairs or individually, not in large groups like I had seen in the airport. These

were tourists, but not volunteer tourists it seemed. They shopped, buying all the typical souvenirs, and stopped to eat at the restaurant with the sign in front that said “Gluten Free!” It seemed that in smaller destinations, it is more common for gringos to be there as volunteers, whereas in Panajachel, a gringo is simply another tourist. I was asked to buy souvenirs and to have my shoes shined (even though they were sandals) rather than asked where I was volunteering or what I was doing there at all. It was simply acceptable that I could be there as an ordinary tourist.

Back in Comalapa, Humberto and I visited the municipality building one Tuesday afternoon to attempt to speak with the Mayor of Comalapa. We arrived in the waiting area outside the mayor’s office and luckily no one else was in line to speak with him. Humberto told the receptionist why we were there. We went into the mayor’s office and asked him if we could interview him. He was direct and hurried when he replied that no, he did not think we should talk to him about this subject. We were rushed out of his office and rounded the corner to the office next door, which he explained was the office for the Tourism Council.

We entered the room where four men were sitting, spread throughout the room on couches and chairs. I requested to record their interview and was denied. We discussed what the council is doing to promote tourism in Comalapa and what they thought they could offer to a tourist. After avoiding the question, one man finally explained, “we closed one of the ‘barrancos’ (trash dump) last week to make the town cleaner, for the health of the environment and the people here as well as tourists.” (Interview - Tourism Council Member) I then asked further questions about what they are doing for the

volunteer tourists that were already visiting and how they could possibly collaborate to better promote their town as a tourist destination. I assumed their response would relate to encouraging the volunteers to visit the numerous art galleries around town or participating in music classes at one of the three music schools. However, their responses were more about collaborating on development projects around town.

“We could collaborate with them on bringing potable water into town. We could have the volunteers or staff from Long Way Home help design or build infrastructural projects, or reforestation projects. If the volunteers are professionals at something, they could tell us so we can collaborate on something. We want to know what kind of other projects they can do here to help or to give guidance on other building projects like designing or treating trash dumps.” (Interview - Tourism Council Member)

Rather than focusing on tourism, the council members immediately jumped to the idea of having volunteers collaborate on infrastructural projects. Even as municipal council members, they recommended and assumed that volunteers were not tourists so much as tools for development. Another council member mentioned that they have no communication with Long Way Home. When I asked why that was considering they were bringing tourists to Comalapa, he replied, “We are more interested in bringing retired tourists here because they bring more money. Backpackers and volunteers don’t consume goods and services so they are welcome here but not who we are focused on attracting” (Interview - Tourism Council Member). It seems the role of volunteer outweighs the role of tourist in the eyes of community members. Volunteers are expected

to help with development projects but not necessarily to consume and sightsee like a “regular” tourist.

Institutional Shortcomings

It was common to joke about the laziness of government officials and police officers and I heard these comments several times while in Guatemala. In exchange for help with translation, I offered to assist Humberto with some of the English classes he taught at the language academy he founded a few years ago. As part of one of the classes, the students had to act out a situation at the market. One group of students decided to act out a scenario in which one girl’s purse was stolen while she was shopping. In the skit, when they confronted a police officer about it, he shrugged off the incident and ultimately a friend of the victim tracked down the thief and retrieved her bag. They made a few jokes throughout the skit about how useless the police officer was, everyone in the class laughing in acknowledgement and understanding. This was when I became aware of the general distrust and disregard of government institutions.

When I interviewed Humberto, we discussed the most important needs in Comalapa, in his opinion. He mentioned things like education, government accountability, tourism, and health care. When discussing the government, his remarks were, “Yeah in the government we need to have better government because now you already met some of them and as you can see we already have a big problem right here. They are not paying me much but my brain is thinking more than them I think haha.” (Interview - Humberto) He was explaining that he works in the mayor’s office a few

times a week to help with a tourism initiative in Comalapa and although they are not paying him much, he feels like he is doing more work than them.

One afternoon, just after lunchtime, Humberto and I went to the Municipal building and met the Tourism Council. People were coming and going from the building, up and down the stairs, and the atmosphere felt busy. However when we went to speak with the council, there was no sign that they had been busy. Dressed in jeans and polo shirts, the 4 men were spread out throughout the light yellow room with the door open. They were dispersed throughout their large office lounging on the couches, drinking sodas, chatting and laughing when we entered the room to speak with them. There were two desks with nothing on them but a pack of water bottles. There were no papers or writing utensils or computers to suggest they had been taking notes or sending correspondence. The two men on the couches were on opposite sides of the room facing each other in their seats and reclined comfortably across half of the couch. One man at one of the desks had his feet on the desk and was leaned back in his desk chair, the other just sat hunched at his desk holding a water bottle. Only one of the men answered my questions, acting I suppose as the spokesperson for the others.

When we had made our introductions and I told them about my research, I asked if I could record them to which they replied no. They allowed me to continue just taking written notes. I asked them what projects they were working on to promote tourism. At first one council member actually said that Comalapa has nothing to offer as a tourist destination. Then the only thing they could tell us they had thought of was closing the

barranco and a far-fetched idea about building a lake with a beach in Comalapa because “tourists love beaches” (Interview - Tourism Council).

Never mind the fact that Comalapa is just a few hours from Lake Atitlan, an extremely popular tourist destination, and there are beaches on both ends of the country on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans respectively. A beach was their only suggestion for how to attract tourists. As we left, Humberto laughed and shook his head, seemingly unsurprised at the discussion. We walked out of the Municipal building and strolled through the ongoing street market together to discuss the conversation we had just left.

These council members were in what appeared more to be a hangout spot rather than a working office considering there were more couches than desks in the room and the only things on the desks were snacks and drinks. Their ideas were taken to be a joke by Humberto, who seemed unsurprised that this was the outcome of the interview. The people in Comalapa have little faith in their government either because of past experiences with corruption or being ignored, so they look to volunteer organizations to help or work to change things on their own. In an interview with two parents of students who go to the school built by the volunteer organization, Long Way Home, I asked who they go to when they have a concern or an issue they would like to have addressed. They began telling me about an issue with the road leading to the school. They had a child in a wheelchair and to get to school he must go on an unpaved, dirt road. The road was often muddy and obstructed by rocks or divots in the path because of the heavy rains during rainy season and the lack of upkeep. They decided to try to do something to change it.

“Okay yeah, first of all they tried to organize a parents group and talk with teachers. The volunteers, they already talk with the neighbors on the way to LWH and they already tried to fix the street a little now, now it’s supposed to be better. But the next step they tried it was like going to the municipality, even the volunteers, the teachers, they already went there but the mayor he only says, ‘Okay we are going to help you, we are going to send you the trucks’ but nothing happens.” (Interview - Viviana and Marco)

The parents went to the volunteer organization first, hoping that the volunteers could do something to fix the road for them and make the school more accessible. Only when the volunteers and the staff at Long Way Home could not sufficiently fix the road did they go to the municipality and ask for the mayor’s assistance. Even after asking for his help, he made them a promise and never followed through, thus reinforcing the idea that it would be more efficient to ask for assistance from the volunteer organization rather than the government. They were hastily dismissed much like I was when I went to speak with him.

Humberto expressed that he believes part of this reliance on outsiders rather than local government could be due to the lack of education in this small town. According to the Municipal Development Plan for 2011-2025, in 2007 enrollment went from 7,191 in primary school, to 1,754 in Basico level (comparable to middle school in US), to only 197 Diversificado level (comparable to High School in US). From that 197 enrolled in Diversificado, only 81% completed their degree (PDM, 2010). Many members of this

community never finished a higher level of schooling because they had responsibilities to their families to make money so education came second. Those who did receive education, according to Humberto, still did not get sufficient skills for self-reliance. He explained that the education system in Guatemala does not encourage self-sufficiency or creativity.

“Part of the education that I never liked is in my opinion, it’s like the modern way to send the people to still be enslaved of everything. Ya know because the teachers usually said if you study you will have a better opportunity to work which is ok. We don’t have financial education which I know something about it but it’s in my own way, my home school, but in the schools we don’t have financial education, we don’t have politics education and our system it’s incomplete, yeah. Its some of the other things because everybody wants to work, wants to study because they are gonna have a better opportunity to get jobs and ya know have more money but they don’t know that they are still only working working working. Their whole life. Yes. One of the problems too I think. Nobody teaches you how to develop your own projects.” (Interview - Humberto)

According to him, people are not taught how to do things at a higher level than basic vocational training and independence is not promoted in schools. In addition to the fact that many students in Guatemala do not get to finish school because of financial responsibility to their family or simply because there is no room in public schools and

private schools are too expensive, they are not getting the basics of education they need to have the capacity to do these infrastructural projects on their own.

Additionally, many people still feel the effects of the armed conflict that ended in the 1990s in Guatemala. During the conflict many indigenous peoples disappeared or were killed in an effort to eradicate indigenous groups in the country and Comalapa was no exception. With a strong majority indigenous Kaqchikel population, Comalapa was subject to the military counterinsurgency common throughout the country in the late 20th century. Señora explained one evening over dinner that during the conflict it was terrible in Comalapa. She told me there were soldiers on every street, people did not speak to each other outside because they were thought to be scheming and were disciplined by the soldiers. She explained that the curfew was six o'clock in the evening and their electricity would be turned off past a certain hour. She described the fear that people had and the feeling of being trapped in her own home. The topic seemed to make her sad and I was not sure how to approach it any further so I did not ask anything more.

My Spanish teacher while I was there took me one day during class time to see the murals that line the wall as you enter the city from the paved road. These murals tell the story of the city from its very early inception in the Mayan creation story all the way through the present. The murals are very well known and are one of the first photos to come up on a Google search of Comalapa. The main road coming from Zaragoza to the south enters Comalapa on the main street leading to the central plaza and colonial church. There are so many murals that it took almost the full hour of my class time to walk along them while my teacher explained them. There were quite a few sections devoted to ancient Mayan customs and a few panels that lamented the mistreatment of indigenous peoples over the course of history with poems and quotes about the terrible things they have endured.

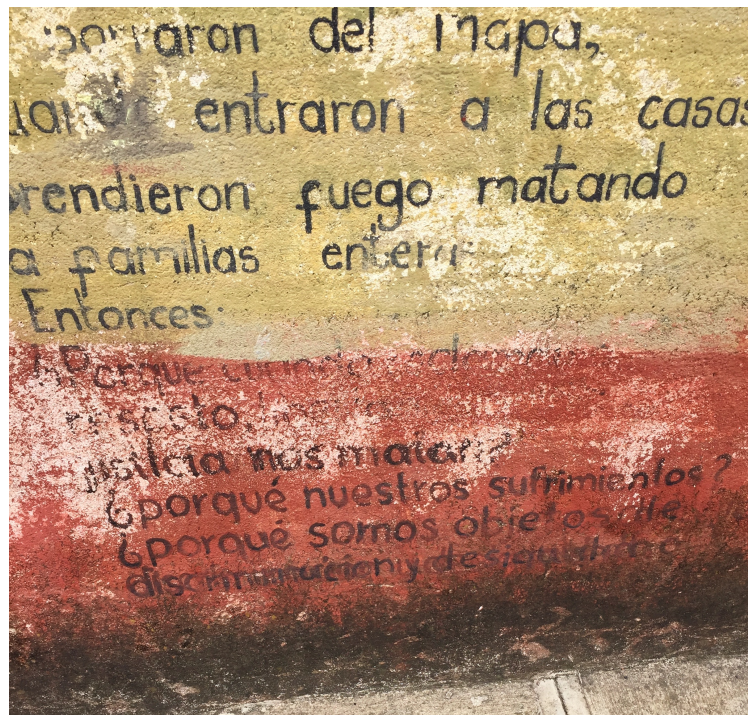


Figure 5.1 - Mural panel with poem (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

Because it covers the complete history of Comalapa, it also includes a section depicting the conflict. My teacher took me through the entire history and when we reached the panel dedicated to the conflict, she told me how there was a mass grave just outside city limits that held bodies of some people who were killed during the conflict and still have not been identified. Additionally, while working with EWB (Engineers Without Borders) in one of the aldeas, next to the community center there is a monument outside honoring people who were killed or disappeared during the conflict from the area, complete with a list of names. The effects of this time in history are literally close to home for Comalapenses.

The memories of the recent conflict that resulted in fear of the government, combined with the general understanding that the government systems are unreliable have contributed to volunteer organizations having a more prominent role in Comalapa. People based on their previous experience, see the volunteer organizations as a more reliable alternative to government institutions for completing basic infrastructural improvements such as bringing potable water to town and fixing roads. The volunteers who come to work with these organizations are seen first as a form of surrogate government with the power and the knowledge to develop their town rather than tourists. While many case studies of the effects of tourism acknowledge the influx of tourists (in any form) as a contributor to development, in this case the tourists are the developers themselves. Rather than development being a side effect of tourism in the area, development is the main focus of why tourists are coming.

Volunteer / Local interactions

Market days were a busy and crowded time. Everyone was there, either selling or buying their groceries for the next few days or buying new clothes and other miscellaneous items. To walk through, I had to continually duck under tarps, tents, and ropes used to tie up products or a makeshift roof, squeeze between tables and excuse myself to push past people standing at a booth, checking out the merchandise. There were booths to buy tacos and smoothies, fresh fruits and vegetables laid out on big blue tarps everywhere, and bright huipiles and cortes hanging up to create tunnels of color. It was



Figure 5.2 - Market day in Comalapa (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

exciting and energetic each time it happened. Over the duration of the summer I spent in Comalapa, I visited the market at least once a week, sometimes accompanied by Señora, most times alone, to wander the covered booths and admire the multicolored displays. The big market days occurred three times per week, on Sundays, Fridays, and Tuesdays, when there was the most variety and people could buy anything from new shoes to bundles of fruit or vegetables. During each of those market visits, I never spotted any of the staff or volunteer tourists from Long Way Home at the market. This was always odd because the market represented not only a place to buy your necessities for the week but also to gather and see friends or even just to browse and socialize.

Additionally, during my time volunteering at Long Way Home for a week, and actually the entire summer, the founder and Executive Director of the organization was out of the country, in South Africa doing work there. There was also a transition of power taking place between the old Volunteer Coordinator and the new one that had just arrived on campus. Of the other volunteers working with me the week I was there, one only stayed for a week, and the other two stayed for two weeks. These observations demonstrate that the volunteers and staff alike were transient, temporary, and invisible in the town center even on its busiest days. In this section I will describe the isolation and lack of engagement I saw during my time in Comalapa and how locals described their interaction, or lack thereof, with volunteers and staff.

Organization Isolation

Early on in my time in Comalapa, between the afternoon English classes for kids and the evening English classes for teenagers/young adults, Humberto and I went to a nearby cafe for some coffee. I was talking to him about my interest in volunteer tourism and especially, Long Way Home and their impact in Comalapa and explaining my research to him. I asked him what he thought of LWH and the work they were doing and he told me that honestly, he did not really know much about what they were doing. He said, “there is no transparency with the community, we never know what they are working on up there.” He explained that unless you are a part of the construction crew or have a student in their school, no one communicates anything to the rest of the



Figure 5.3 - Procession in Comalapa (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

community. He started getting worked up and continued on about how the American staff is not very involved in the community. As he spoke, it was as if he was realizing how absent the staff members were from the goings-on around the community, especially during key events like the processions during the celebrations of the patron Saint John.

The celebration of Saint John and subsequent feria were happening the week I arrived, which made my sudden arrival in Comalapa that much more difficult to take in. The feria is the main event of the year, even more popular than the celebrations for Christmas and Easter. People from smaller municipalities and even other departments come to town to either visit the feria or to work in it. There are games, food stalls, clothing booths, and large carnival rides like the “rueda” (Ferris wheel). There are fireworks and “bombas” every night, and the breadth of the festivities goes several blocks beyond the main plaza in each direction. People consistently made comments about how lucky I was to arrive during the feria so that I did not miss it. Luckily, Señora welcomed me by taking me to all the notable spots around town, introducing me to her friends, and inviting me to participate in the festivities, including the several processions throughout the week led by different churches.

I participated in three of the processions during the week. The first was a procession around the main four blocks around the central plaza where the colonial catholic church of St. John was located. We only traveled around half of the full procession route, handing water bottles to the band members between songs. The crowd was extremely large and everyone was dressed as they would be on any other day, except the band was dressed in suits. People walked in reverence for the saint and the band

played different marches and national songs, but I was the only gringo around. After the procession Señora, the band members, and I went to a friend's house near the plaza to eat chuchitos and atol. The people gathered to eat ranged from 16-year-old band members, busy texting and laughing to 70-year-old men speaking Kaqchikel to each other. I was told that chuchitos are a food for celebrations and special occasions and that was why we were eating them.

The second procession was smaller, led by Señora's church which has a smaller congregation, and followed the road from the center of town, near the church itself, all the way out one of the dirt roads leading to the more rural aldea to the east of the municipality's center. It ended at the home of a congregation member and his wife. They cooked a large lunch of pepian with rice and atol for everyone and held a short church service in the home. This procession also had no other gringo participants and my presence seemed unusual because many people stared at me and asked why I was in Comalapa. However, the mix of participants included young and old, children and their grandparents, and seemingly everyone was friends or family.

The final procession I took part in, as well as the largest, was the procession beginning in the church of St. John in the central plaza that led around the circumference of the plaza and back into the church. This procession was unlike the other two I had participated in because it was at night and it was an extremely short route, although the pomp and circumstance meant it was not short in duration. It was the main night of the feria, a Friday night. The market was at its largest, there was music and fireworks, the crowd was making it difficult to move through the narrow pathways between sweet

stands and pop-up pupusa booths, and still I was the only gringo in sight. Having researched Long Way Home before arriving in Guatemala, I knew what the staff looked like from their photos on the organization's website so I scanned the crowd to find another American face but I could not see any. This was shocking to me, that at the biggest event of the year in this town, none of the staff from this community development organization were present for the festivities from what I could tell. I had assumed they were not at the aforementioned processions and festivities because they occurred during the day and on weekdays however, this procession occurred on a weekend night.

Although I had not already been in contact with LWH at the time of the feria, I had planned to volunteer with LWH for a week of my stay in Guatemala to better understand the relationship between locals and volunteers and staff and how they viewed each other in the context of the project itself. The locations of the campus and park are a short hike outside of town, the school campus being much closer than the park which requires a shortcut hike on a narrow wooded path - even though the volunteer handbook describes the location of the school as not in a separate aldea but a barrio of Comalapa.

Additionally, the handbook contains a section about San Juan Comalapa but it is only one page and it briefly describes the traditional clothing commonly worn in Comalapa as well as its proximity to other tourist hotspots like Antigua and Lake Atitlan. The extensive number of art galleries, the multiple music schools, and the cultural center are not mentioned anywhere. The lack of inclusion of any tourism-related activities in the handbook suggests that volunteers are not encouraged to experience Comalapa as a tourist destination and instead should travel elsewhere to get that experience.

Walking around Comalapa there are no signs or directions for LWH posted anywhere. There are also no formal street names on any of the streets, only descriptions of streets like “the 1st street in zona 4” which are only clear if you are very familiar with the layout of the city so directions to get to LWH are mostly based on landmarks. The only indication I could see that people knew of LWH was from a homemade map at the English Academy, used to teach how to tell directions in English, but Humberto had experience working with LWH, and some of their volunteers made the map. The school arrangement itself is very isolated. There is a giant retaining wall built of tires as you approach so you cannot even see the campus behind it from the road unless you make your way up and around the tire wall. Upon arriving at the school and seeing this wall, the campus seems very cut off from the rest of Comalapa not only physically, but also in that this building technique is so entirely new and different that there is an air of mystery surrounding the “Escuela de Llantas”.



Figure 5.4 - Retaining wall of tires at entrance to LWH campus (Photo: Samantha Hagan)



Figure 5.5 - Handmade map of Comalapa from the English Academy (Photo: Samantha Hagan)



Figure 5.6 - Dirt road to LWH school campus (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

There are two routes to reach the school from the center of town; both are difficult to walk, especially after heavy rain. One family that I interviewed explained that for their son in a wheelchair, reaching his school each day could feel impossible. There are rocks in the path, mud when it rains heavily - which it does every day during the rainy season - and when they asked for assistance from the mayor to pave the road or at least clean it up, their request was brushed aside. LWH attempted to clean up one of the roads, but still the path is difficult.

The road I took to walk to the campus every morning while I was volunteering was not much better. The road is paved up to a point, then there is a steep drop off where it is just rocks to make a steep and uneven slope. This leads down to an all dirt road that wraps around the hill and is flanked by agricultural fields on either side for about six minutes until you finally reach the school. I found it difficult to navigate this road on rainy days, and the rocky part any day, so I could see how frustrating it truly must have been for the family of the child in a wheelchair.

While volunteers are working with LWH, they typically stay at volunteer houses located in the park, although they have the option of staying in a hotel in town or with a host family - both at an extra cost - and staff live on campus of the school or in the park. Any socializing outside of work typically happens in the park. When I was introduced to the volunteer coordinator on my first visit she said, "Come to the park and hang out if you want to hang out with other gringos!" We exchanged phone numbers so that she could alert me to any social event with the gringos. Even though she offered this, everyone - staff and volunteers - leave town on weekends for excursions to other

locations. Neither she, nor the other volunteers working with me during the days, ever contacted me to do things in the evenings in the park with them, much less in town.

One concern the volunteers had when I asked one of them if they planned to come into town at all in the evenings was that it was unsafe to travel that far when it is dark. The park is a very long walk or a considerable distance even by tuk-tuk, so volunteers did not want to put themselves at risk at night. “Plus we are so tired in the evening after we shower and eat dinner that we just want to hang out in the park” (Interview - Builder). Whether by accident or on purpose, the volunteers did not really even consider coming into town during their time off, cutting them off from the local community. When I asked the three volunteers working with me if they had been to any of the art galleries, they responded, “There are art galleries?” Because this information is left out of the handbook and the volunteers spend such little time in town exploring, they do not even know what Comalapa has to offer and thus do not come into town to learn about the history or vibrant artistic culture of Comalapa. The only times I encountered gringos in town, they were on a bus about to leave.

Between bouts of work, during small breaks, the local workers talk with each other and volunteers talk to staff and each other. They did not really mingle. During work activities the volunteers make small talk with the workers if they can speak Spanish and try to teach some English as well. The staff generally was present walking around to check in on progress of work but did not socialize during daily snack time except with each other. Some of the staff does not even speak Spanish, nor do some volunteers, which may be hindering their interactions as well. Most workers do not speak English except for

a few phrases picked up over time working with other volunteers. Workers seemed reluctant to speak with me about their jobs other than short positive comments, presumably because I am a gringa and because I may have been perceived to be working for LWH even though I had no working relationship with them outside of my week of volunteer work.

In an interview with one of the builders employed by LWH, I asked about his interactions with the volunteers and the staff. At first he was uneasy about being audio recorded and after a moment of debate and my reassurance that no one else would hear the recording, he agreed. When I asked him about his interactions with the volunteers and staff he told me that the workers and volunteers and staff sometimes get together for a cookout or bonfire type of event in the park where the volunteers and staff live but typically only one staff member - the architect who is their direct supervisor each day - comes very often to socialize. Sometimes, the founder/ Executive Director comes as well but he said, “when Mateo is here he usually comes too and yeah but he is more focusing on his work on his computer and he only comes when the food is ready just to eat and then yeah.” (Interview - Builder) When Mateo is even in town at all, if he comes it is primarily to eat and continue working rather than socialize.

The builder also told me of an incident where the gringos were thought to be drinking too much and the locals were upset. “One of the other things which is really important is there is a time when people tried to, when people made mistake. They thought that the volunteers were drinking everywhere alcohol and they were like drunkards.” (Interview - Builder) This was a big problem for the locals. He explained,

“You know like in your culture it is normal to drink something but here it is normal too but it’s more normal to have drunkards than social drinkers. And they usually do the recommendation when volunteers come to not drink too much or everywhere, that’s why they usually prefer to go out and know other places and have fun there.” (Interview - Builder)

Because drinking is somewhat of a taboo, the gringo volunteers and staff go elsewhere outside of Comalapa to drink or party on the weekends. It was common in Comalapa to see some older men sprawled on the side of the road, passed out from drinking too much at any time of day. When I asked Humberto and another teacher at the English Academy where I was working about drinking and why people do or do not drink, they told me that people only drink for special occasions like at parties or holidays but typically people do not drink often. They did not go into any more detail about why people were against social drinking and it seemed like an uncomfortable and taboo topic so I did not press further. I did not have any alcohol my entire stay because no one around me, even during the feria or for birthday celebrations, was drinking alcohol. Señora mentioned once that she enjoyed wine but never had any while I was staying with her.

Other than the bonfires and cookouts, the builder mentioned that occasionally, volunteers would overhear the builders talking about playing soccer at a field nearby after work and would join in. Outside of those occasions, the gringos and workers stayed fairly separated, at work and after work.

Humberto and I went to interview the superintendent in the Education office across from the Municipal building. The superintendent began telling me that since one of the original staff members, who was the liaison between the superintendent and the school at LWH left, he has not had any more contact with anyone there.

“Mateo started working with some more people, he has more people who are developing more projects about careers (vocational school) but they never consider the superintendent or the people who was helping them since they began their project. Um, yeah now he doesn’t know what’s happening up there. If they want to open the careers level for the next school year maybe it’s impossible because they have to come here first then go to Chimal.” (Interview - Superintendent)

Even though the school has been in the process of building a new section and hiring teachers to teach different subjects in the vocational school, they have not actually contacted the superintendent, which is necessary to opening the school. The previous contact brought his replacement to meet the superintendent to establish a relationship but he has not been heard from again, apparently. One of the recommendations the superintendent made towards the end of our conversation was that LWH staff should be more polite and more visible. “They are a little away from everything, they are a little indifferent with the people, maybe they should be more I don’t know if the word is polite” (Interview - Superintendent). He also mentioned that people from the other schools in town visit or drop in occasionally to check in or say hello but the people from LWH never do that, much less come to talk about their ongoing projects.

Similarly, the members of the Tourism Council that I spoke with had not had contact with LWH and did not know what kinds of projects they were doing or what skills they could share. They wanted to collaborate but did not feel a connection to LWH to start anything. Part of the reason for the lack of contact was that LWH is not a general development organization, they are there for their own purpose and project so they are not looking to start new, more varied projects throughout town. However, as hosts to volunteer tourists, they should perhaps be meeting with tourism council members to strategize how to engage with the tourists they are bringing to Comalapa already.

In another conversation with Humberto about LWH, he described a type of vending machine that accepts trash or recyclable materials in exchange for healthy food or produce. He had heard about this invention online and thought it was an exciting idea and since it incorporated recycling and trash collection he mentioned it to Mateo. He told Mateo about the invention and asked if he thought it would be something to try out on the school campus, maybe for the students or even somewhere else around Comalapa, and the donated recycled materials could be given to LWH. Humberto said that Mateo immediately said “no” and that was it. He felt dismissed and frustrated that his suggestion had not even been considered. Mateo simply said no and left the conversation, leaving Humberto feeling ignored. He said this was fairly common for Mateo to be dismissive when locals give suggestions or ideas. He also told me that LWH used to send volunteers wanting to learn Spanish down to his Academy but recently they started hiring a different Spanish teacher to come to campus to teach volunteers instead of having the volunteers leave campus.

There were numerous examples of volunteers and staff isolating themselves from the rest of Comalapa and Comalapenses wanting contact and inclusion with LWH. The volunteers and staff, essentially the gringos, are leaving town or not leaving LWH property (the school campus and the park). Meanwhile, the Comalapenses feel excluded from the volunteer organizations' projects and when they try to include themselves they are often dismissed or ignored. The staff does not have strong relationships with the people they are supposed to and the only people who occasionally get to interact with them socially are the builders who actually work on-site. Otherwise, LWH is disconnected both physically and socially from the rest of the municipality, which is not advantageous for advancing their goals or creating community.

Shaping Comalapa

Along with volunteer tourism comes new projects and ideas for the future. In most of my interviews, as well as observations, informants mentioned how dirty and trash-filled Comalapa had been in the past and how new recycling programs have helped to change that in the present and will continue to do so in the future. The only problem with these statements, however, is that many residents of Comalapa still do not recycle in their homes, schools, offices, or shops, not necessarily because they do not like recycling but because it is not easy. There are no public recycling bins scattered throughout town and many people still throw their plastic bottles or food wrappers on the ground without looking back.

While the problem of waste reduction is not drastically different than it used to be, people are now talking about it more and beginning to see it as an important issue. The organization Long Way Home began in Comalapa in 2008 after the founder, Mateo, completed his service as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer there. While in the Peace Corps, he noticed a trash problem in Comalapa and went back to the U.S. to create a plan to start an organization whose main goal would be to combat that issue and make a cleaner community. He chose to do this by creating a school built out of recyclable materials and trash. Students and staff alike would bring their recyclable materials to school and they sorted them for use in walls, decorations, skylights, etc.

Around the same time, the ongoing cultural exchange called Amistad, with a city in Norway, began a recycling project in Comalapa. They created a recycling center on one of the frequently traversed streets in Comalapa that would accept recyclable items from people in the community, weigh it, and pay that person accordingly. The center would then compact these recyclable materials into blocks and transport them to the capital city where they would be handed off again.

Incentives

This sudden increase in talk about recycling, incentives to recycle, and uses for recycled material has led to an increase in awareness about what to do with certain materials instead of throwing them in the town dump. Additionally, many people whom I spoke with agreed that the dumps or barrancos needed to be closed. The barrancos are natural cliffs, or gorges that people regularly bring their garbage to and throw over the

edge, out of sight, out of mind. Everything from food scraps to plastic bags and old electronics go into the barranco, which, because of this amalgam of items, regularly catches on fire as well as brings stray dogs, insects, and unpleasant smells to the town. Because of all of these negative effects of having the barrancos conveniently located in the center of town, people are starting to agree that these need to be shut down or replaced with a safer and environmentally cleaner option. However, every time they shut down one of the dumps, people continue sneaking their garbage over the edge because of lack of a better option. One informant explained the impact that Long Way Home has had on Comalapa.

“Years ago there were too many trash flying and on the streets in front of the house but now if you go and walk on the streets you can find trash yes but it’s less than before and even when they recollect the trash to use to fill bottles uh they have to go in the streets and they sometimes don’t find enough trash to fill their bottles.” (Interview - Viviana y Marco)

One of the benefits of enrolling your child at the school at Long Way Home is that in lieu of tuition, you can provide four plastic bottles filled with trash to the school to use as building material. In the case of this family, they have three children all enrolled in the Técnico Chixot school at Long Way Home. They explain that because of the emphasis on recycling that Long Way Home has encouraged in the community, it is becoming more difficult to fill bottles with trash due to less trash being thrown in the street. By encouraging this donation of recycled material filled with trash, Long Way Home is promoting environmental stewardship and mindful waste disposal in the homes

of students and families connected to the organization, as well as on campus during the school day.

Although the families are learning about recycling and how to properly dispose of trash, it is still through an incentivized process, not an institutionalized process. They are not recycling for the sake of recycling but rather to avoid the stress of paying tuition in money they do not have. This may not be the end goal of the organization but it is at least a starting point to create careful habits in the homes of some community members. The families of students at Long Way Home know they need to recycle because the organization is telling them to, but it has not yet become institutionalized throughout the town as a whole.

The recycling center created by the Amistad exchange group accepts recyclable materials from people in exchange for money. People are paid according to the weight of their recycling. Occasionally though, the recycling center runs out of money to give people bringing their materials. Humberto explained to me that the recycling center cannot always give people money for their recycling, or if they can, they will give some small amount even if it is not the full amount the recycling is worth. While in Comalapa, the home I was living in was directly next door to the recycling center. My bedroom shared a wall with the center and I passed it every time I walked out my front door. I only saw people dropping off their recycling there three times during the two months I was living there. Señora had a basket for recycling in her home but she was one of the members of the Amistad exchange group and had traveled to Norway five times with the exchange and helped start the recycling center.

Walking around town there was trash scattered in the streets and the plaza. Several times I had been eating or drinking something and wanted to throw away my wrapper or bottle and there were no trash or recycling bins to be found. In the center of town, next to the little kiosk across from the colonial church, there was a small, fenced in square area that was supposedly a trash bin but it looked like it had not been maintained each time I passed it and from what I could see, there was no label on it explaining that it was a trash bin. Additionally, there were no recycling bins anywhere either. In each shop that I went in or restaurant I ate at, there were no trash or recycling bins anywhere accessible for customers. Humberto also told me there are no recycling bins in the other schools around town. How are people supposed to start recycling if it is not a part of their daily lives? How can recycling become part of daily life if careful trash disposal is not even easy or available around town?

Since Long Way Home was created to change Comalapa's trash problem, I wondered if they promoted recycling in town, outside of their school campus. This did not seem to be the case. Without word of mouth, it would be hard to even know that LWH exists, much less what they do. There are no signs or information posted anywhere around town about where to find LWH, or the recycling center either. Both of these places could go unnoticed for quite some time if it were not for locals talking to each other about both places. The recycling center is even located on the same street that many buses going to Guatemala City, a popular destination, pick up from.

Although these volunteer organizations are promoting environmental stewardship through recycling initiatives and incentives, the message is not carrying past their direct

participants. Families of school children who attend Tecnico Chixot at LWH are recycling at home to avoid paying tuition fees, people occasionally bring recycling to the Amistad recycling center for money, and it seems that everyone else conducts business as usual. People throw their trash on the ground or in the barranco because they do not have any other options of where to put it. LWH and Amistad are trying to create a culture of recycling and composting but they are not making it easy. LWH or Amistad could have schools put recycling bins in every classroom or restaurants could collect compost to be donated to any of the several agricultural fields surrounding the town. In order for people to embrace recycling or careful waste management, it must be institutionalized in the community as a whole, not just a small segment.



Figure 5.7 - Pile of Recyclables at Long Way Home (Photo: Samantha Hagan)

Conclusion

Throughout my time in Comalapa, I talked to several people involved in many different roles in the community. I volunteered with two separate organizations and I participated in community events. Based on my observations and interviews, it seemed that volunteer tourists are mainly seen as volunteers and developers rather than tourists to be profited from. This relates to the lack of confidence in the government institutions that are supposed to develop infrastructure and address community needs. People assume the government cannot or will not help them, so they look to foreign volunteer organizations instead to fill the gaps.

However, these organizations are so isolated and removed from the community both physically and socially, they can not sufficiently address the needs of the community and promote their goals and missions outside of their own operations. They are not engaged with the community members who work with or alongside them, much less the community at large. Keeping this divide between the organization communities and the municipal community is preventing the organizations' goals of environmental stewardship and awareness, and further infrastructural development, from progressing in the municipality.

Chapter Six: Analysis Chapter

Introduction

Volunteer tourism is still a relatively new and growing sector within the tourism world. Its role as a tool of development aid as well as a form of alternative tourism has placed it as a unique link between development and the tourism industry. Unlike mainstream tourism, which can indirectly result in development of the host community, volunteer tourism is the direct contributor to development. However, because voluntourism is still growing as a tool of development, it has not yet taken on the responsibilities that most developmental organizations have in their host communities, making them less sustainable because of the transience of the voluntourists.

In the previous chapter, I described my observations and the results of interviews with community members about voluntourism in Comalapa. In this chapter I will use those observations and interviews to place this particular case of voluntourism into the broader scope of tourism and development and demonstrate how voluntourism has become the bridge between the two. Tourism has always been a force and source of development but in the sense that there needed to be infrastructure to provide a comfortable and consumable setting for the tourists. Voluntourism is now sending people to places that do not yet have that infrastructure and tourists are building it themselves. Because of this difference in approach to development through tourism, host community

members in Comalapa view tourists first and foremost as volunteers there to “develop” their community, rather than as tourists there to consume their art, history, and products.

Using the literature discussed in my literature review, I will situate my own research within this context and compare “development” in the context of tourism to the traditional understanding of development as aid for the underdeveloped. In making this comparison, I will demonstrate how volunteer tourism connects these two approaches and has created a sort of hybrid sector. Finally, in this chapter I will discuss how voluntourism organizations, specifically Long Way Home, must adopt more strategies that are key to development processes, such as community engagement and government coalition, if they are going to function and be perceived primarily as a tool of development.

Voluntourism as Development

There is a fine line between tourism and development. Tourism is indirectly associated with development while development can be thought to lead to tourism. They have always had a relationship, especially since rapid globalization began connecting the world in new ways and creating new relationships between countries and their people. Development in terms of tourism has typically been associated with more focused projects that only deal with what is important for tourists, not necessarily infrastructural projects for local people. For example, in my interview with the Tourism Council when they described their idea of building a beach to attract tourists, that could be considered

primarily a tourism-based development strategy because it is only for the purpose of attracting tourists, not doing anything to help local people directly.

LWH, even though they are a voluntourism organization, do more infrastructural, community-based development projects. With the families that have a student who attends LWH and asked for the road to be maintained and improved so it is easier to get to school, LWH tried to do road maintenance. Additionally, the tourism council wanted LWH to help them with closing the barrancos and finding a trash solution. These requests from the community are acknowledged by LWH in their volunteer handbook. “Area residents began coming to LWH for help with other endeavors” (LWH Volunteer Handbook 2016:3).

In my Results chapter, I demonstrate a trend in the popularity of volunteering in Guatemala, since everyone asked me if I was a volunteer rather than assuming I was a tourist. Even the Tourism Council said that they did not want backpackers or volunteers; rather they wanted retired people, real tourists who can spend money and consume goods and services. Volunteering and tourism are not associated and do not seem to overlap in the minds of people in Guatemala and Comalapa specifically. However, “Typically what we have assumed is that tourism has been imposed on locals, not sought, and not invited.” (Stronza 2001:262). Stronza makes the case that people actively seek tourism in their communities. In this case, locals in the way of asking for help with development have sought out voluntourism.

LWH as a voluntourism organization resembles a development agency more so than a tourism company. They do not offer excursions or cultural experiences for their

volunteers and they do not give much touristic guidance in their handbook and orientation for volunteers. They actually discourage travel and traditional tourism on the weekends because “construction work is demanding and you should be well rested for work on Monday” (LWH Volunteer Handbook 2016:11). They also give no background on any of the tourism-type experiences available in Comalapa. The only page actually dedicated to giving information about Comalapa simply states some demographic and environmental facts and gives a brief introduction of the traditional indigenous dress. If the voluntourists from LWH are not even interacting with Comalapenses, then there is no cross-cultural understanding or potential for benefitting from that interaction.

Voluntourism and Community Engagement

In my Results Chapter, I discuss the lack of engagement and isolation of LWH from the rest of the community in Comalapa. The superintendent talked about the staff and volunteers being cold or impolite, Humberto talked about the staff being dismissive of local input, I described how the campus is physically isolated and how the staff and volunteers are rarely in town for anything, even the most important events. From all of this it seems obvious that the organization needs to improve their visibility and establish themselves as more than just the mysterious “Escuela de Llantas.”

To me, it seems that the transience of tourists in the traditional sense of tourism - coming to a place for vacation and only consuming goods and services - means it is alright to keep somewhat of a distance from the local community since the reason you are there may be to relax or get away from daily life. However, voluntourists have a different

role than traditional tourists in that they are actively contributing to the community that is hosting them, so their engagement with the community members is paramount to having a successful and sustainable project. Since LWH is primarily being perceived by the local community as a development organization rather than a bringer of tourism, the volunteers as well as staff should be having more interaction with the community members, other than only working construction with them during the day.

In my interview with the Builder from LWH, he explained how sometimes one or two of the staff members may come to their bonfires in the evenings or play soccer with them but other than that, they do not do much else inside the community. Especially since the staff are constantly experiencing turnover and the volunteers are typically visiting short-term, it seems there is never time to build any relationships between the host community members and LWH.

With EWB, in their project in Xiquin, only being there for two weeks the students built deeper relationships with the locals than any I saw at LWH. EWB students ate meals together with the COCODE, they hosted a town hall meeting to talk about the project and answer questions, and they met essentially each person in the community because they had to visit each home to build the water system past their properties. The EWB students also stayed with a local community member, shopped in the market, and explored the community in the short time they were in Comalapa. Because of the relationships they built and the openness with the community, their project was extremely successful, accomplished quickly, and the local people seemed more appreciative of the work they did since they took the time to explain what they were doing and why. In taking the time

to make these connections, they actually had meaningful cross-cultural interactions and it benefitted both the community and the students because it made their job easier in completing the project.

These interactions do not occur with LWH, even though volunteers and staff there both typically stay longer than the EWB group. “Rather than emphasizing the importance of learning about other cultures, industry discourse downplays the challenges of navigating cultural differences, typically promising positive, unproblematic cross-cultural encounters” (Garland 2012:7). The LWH handbook briefly describes greetings, and things to look out for like unwanted attention for females and cat-calling, but other than that, they do not give any other cultural information or any kind of cultural orientation to help volunteers get a better understanding of the culture of Comalapa.

LWH is extremely distant, both physically and socially, from Comalapa as a community.

“ The location and proximity of a local community to tourism practices affect the way in which the community perceives the effects of voluntourism as a whole. These perceptions are often derived from experiences formed through persuasion, social influence, and attitude changes” (Kidder and Spears 2011:2).

If people feel distant from the organization and its projects, that does not bode well for the perceptions of what they are doing. Being close with the community has immense benefits for the community as well as the organization. However, “The majority of locals can only participate in tourism through wage labor employment or small, petty retail and artisan enterprises” (Britton 1982:355). This is true with LWH especially because they only employ locals to be construction workers or schoolteachers but not on the

administrative staff or to do any kind of coordinating of the projects. Keeping the local community at this level rather than allowing them to take ownership in the project and share responsibility is unsustainable and detrimental to the entire process.

Bramwell and Lane put it best when they say “socially equitable development depends on participation by all sectors of society in the decision-making about development options” (2000:4). A true partnership involves the whole community in the decision-making process and if that is not happening, the development will not be sustainable and the project will not be easily transferrable to community ownership. Not only should LWH be including locals in the decision-making process, but they should be careful to include marginalized peoples and other groups that are affected by their projects. “A key question is whether the range of participating stakeholders is representative of all stakeholders affected by the issue or issues” (Bramwell and Lane 2000:10). If the necessary stakeholders are not involved and given a voice, then only a portion of the population is being served. While I know some of the drawbacks of collaboration and the difficulties it can create, I still believe that engagement and collaboration typically work better than distance and separation from the community being served.

“Local feelings, it is generally assumed, are of secondary importance in the evolution of tourist industries since the customers are outsiders and the capital and management are seldom local” (Smith 1989:188). Local opinions are often ignored by LWH and dismissed because they do not fit with what the founder, Mateo, wants even though Mateo is rarely even on campus or in Comalapa any more. He is managing the

organization from afar and being that disconnected from the community is not helpful to his cause. By including more local people in the administration and decision-making, the organization will likely have more success. “Too often we regard the local communities and regions that receive tourists as being the passive recipients of a tourist dynamic,” but we know that local communities are not passive (Stronza 2001:267). They have opinions and goals and ideas that should not be ignored, but rather welcomed.

To summarize, community members view LWH primarily as a development organization rather than a tourism organization. If this is the case, LWH should be more like a development agency in their processes and practices, which includes actively seeking local participation and inclusion in every part of the development process. The people of Comalapa want to be included in the development of their community and should be afforded the opportunity.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

San Juan Comalapa in a way is a microcosm of voluntourism and development in the Global South. There are multiple voluntourism organizations doing development projects there, each with a different approach and different goals. Voluntourism is a bridge between development aid and traditional tourism and because of this, voluntourism organizations play various roles in this community and are still defining their own role with these dual identities. While some projects and organizations seem more successful than others, they all have the potential to be successful and make a lasting impact in the community.

Comalapenses are welcoming, hospitable, and eager to improve their own community, which is why I wish that Long Way Home would take advantage of the fact that the community wants to be involved. As part of this research, I hope to compile a list of recommendations for LWH to consider in the future of their projects and to help make their work more successful in the form of a shorter, summarized report. I will keep local informants anonymous and remove any potentially identifying information in order to prevent any negative repercussions. I simply hope to help them improve the way they help others.

Voluntourism has many flaws; otherwise it would not be so widely criticized. However, I believe that people generally want to do good and make the world a better, more comfortable place for everyone and that is why I chose to study voluntourism to begin with. When people have the genuine desire to help other people and contribute to a happier world, I do not think we can discount that but I do think we can help improve the processes by which they try to achieve that goal. Connecting people through generosity is vital to the survival of our population on this planet and if voluntourism can do that, rather than trying to discourage it - we, especially as anthropologists, should try to improve and encourage it.

Completing this research has been instrumental in shaping how I understand the field of Anthropology, how I think of development, and how I will travel as a tourist in the future. I had a set of expectations at the beginning of this process of how it would change my views or my interactions in the world but most of those were different than what I actually experienced. I have learned that being an anthropologist means being able to be flexible, patient, and open to new experiences. I have been welcomed without judgment by the community in Comalapa and I hope to keep those relationships throughout the years to come.

Growth only happens when we are forced out of our comfort zones and this process has definitely forced me to grow beyond what I thought I was capable of. I did not imagine at the beginning of this Master's program that I could actually complete my own research in which people would willingly talk to me about what I wanted to ask but

that happened and so much more. I find that people will talk when you are willing to listen and not judge.

LWH is welcome in the community but the people there would like more ownership and input. In my Results and Analysis Chapters, I provided the evidence of this and how it was conveyed and in my Literature Review Chapter I provided a theoretical framework background through which to understand these results. My goal in doing this research was to be a means of consolidating opinions and information from locals about how they viewed the role of voluntourism in their community and to be able to convey what they have told me in a productive way. It is my sincere hope that this research will contribute to improving the processes of voluntourism not only in Comalapa but also in the world more generally. Voluntourism is a relatively recent trend and it has most definitely not been perfected yet. Organizations are still struggling to determine the best way to help others and make positive change. This research could illuminate some of the differences in viewpoints host communities may have and help organizations learn the importance of gauging how they are viewed by their intended beneficiaries. In addition, I hope this encourages members of host communities to reach out to the NGOs and volunteers working in their community, and to understand how important their input is in all of these processes.

Within the field of anthropology, I hope to encourage further research into voluntourism since it is a rapidly growing and interesting field. As we move to a more sustainable focus in both travel styles and development methods, voluntourism can play an important role in achieving sustainability. As anthropologists, we can act as mediators

and connectors between host communities and the larger field of development or tourism and become part of that sustainability process.

Lastly, for people wanting to travel and volunteer abroad or even closer to home, I hope that this makes voluntourists take time to research where they are going to volunteer and make sure the organization they choose to go through is sustainable and engaged with the community. While in their host community, they should also try to get to know local people and go out of their comfort zones because that is the best way to make new connections and start understanding other people and places.

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