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# International 'Voluntourism' as Secular Pilgrimage: A Case Study of Hosts and Guests in a Small Panamanian Town

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In this paper, I discuss the social dynamics of international 'voluntourism' in Santa Catalina, a small town on the Pacific coast of Panama that has become a tourist mecca in the last two decades. Through my collection of documentary, interview, and ethnographic data, I contribute to on-going debates about the appropriateness and impact of volunteer tourism in developing countries (McGehee 2009, 2012; Palacios 2010; Tomazos and Butler 2012). While existing research tends to focus on the volunteers, here I focus on the complex relations between the volunteers and the 'voluntoured' (local Panamanians). My preliminary research shows significant parallels between secular international volunteers and short-term missionaries (often disparaged as partaking in 'Christian tourism' rather than genuine religious service). Specifically, both types of volunteers tend to exude a similar missionary zeal and the dual goal of enriching (or even 'transforming') their own lives while 'helping others;' both envision themselves as embarking on sacred journeys (Cohen 1979; Graburn 1989). In addition to empirically addressing questions about privilege and power, and whether (or how) international volunteering inadvertently perpetuates global inequalities, this research illuminates the difficulties in negotiating respect across unequal social positions and in interactions between seemingly agnostic local hosts and foreign guests on sacred journeys.

**Key Words:** tourism impacts, Panama, voluntourism

## Introduction

Ranked number one in 2014 by the magazine *International Living* as the top destination for American retirees, Panama has become a haven for foreigners. While the country is attractive for a variety of reasons, one of the most significant is Panamanian law which is remarkably advantageous to foreigners. Foreigners can easily buy land, qualify for permanent residency or even full citizenship, and obtain pensions and health insurance. Panama is economical for foreigners not only because foreign-earned income is not taxed, but also because businesses are not heavily burdened with restrictions, regulations, or taxes. As a result many residential tourists become residential tourist entrepreneurs (*Focus Panama* 40:1, Jan 2014: 35-6; see also Benson and Jackiewicz 2013:230)<sup>[1]</sup>. In this paper, I focus on a distinct type of traveller who is intimately intertwined with residential tourist

entrepreneurs: international volunteers. The terms 'international volunteerism', 'volunteer tourism' and 'voluntourism' all refer to individuals who volunteer to work for an organization or cause outside of their home country. In most cases, volunteers from developed countries go to developing countries and work with local partners to address basic needs (e.g. health, sanitation, education) in the community. Researchers consistently find that 'the main motivations of volunteer tourists include a desire to help, the possibility of a unique travel experience, and personal development' (Morgan n/d; Tomazos 2010). However, critics charge that 'the Western intention of *helping*' is as much a colonialist as it is a humanitarian enterprise, and that it tends 'to reproduce the same global patterns of inequality and poverty, leaving intact – if not reinforcing – the dominant position of the North' (Palacios 2010, p. 864; italics in original). In this paper, I discuss the impact of international volunteers in Santa Catalina, Panama, a small town on the Pacific coast in the province of Veraguas, in the midst of change, and I compare and contrast the motivation and impact of secular international volunteers and religiously-motivated international volunteers (e.g. missionaries).

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1. Residential tourism refers to *the temporary or permanent mobility of relatively well-to-do citizens from mostly western countries to a variety of tourist destinations, where they buy... property* (van Noorloos 2012). Those who start businesses (e.g. B&Bs) are called residential tourist entrepreneurs.

Photo 1: Santa Catalina



## Historical and Methodological Background

Many Panamanian towns have experienced growth and change in the last few decades, but the case of Santa Catalina is particularly profound. Until the 1970s, Santa Catalina was a small, remote fishing village of some 400 people. There was no tourism or foreign-owned property in this tiny town in the province of Veraguas on the Pacific coast. The tourism industry in Santa Catalina began in the late 1970s after a surf spot known as 'The Point' was 'discovered' by a surfer from Panama City, and a few rustic campsites were established where surfers could camp or put up their tents. In those days, Santa Catalina was accessible only via a pot-holed dirt road and had no modern amenities, so the first surfers who came to Santa Catalina were both adventurous, and few and far between. Up until recently, cell phone reception and Internet access have been absent (and signals are still weak); credit cards have not been accepted; and locals generally speak only Spanish. It is also important to note that Panama has one of the lowest-ranked educational systems in Latin America (and the world). According to Matson and Terran (2011)

*Out of 139 nations, Panama's primary education ranks 129, according to the World Economic Forum's 'Global Competitiveness Report' for 2010-2011. Its higher education is ranked 128.*

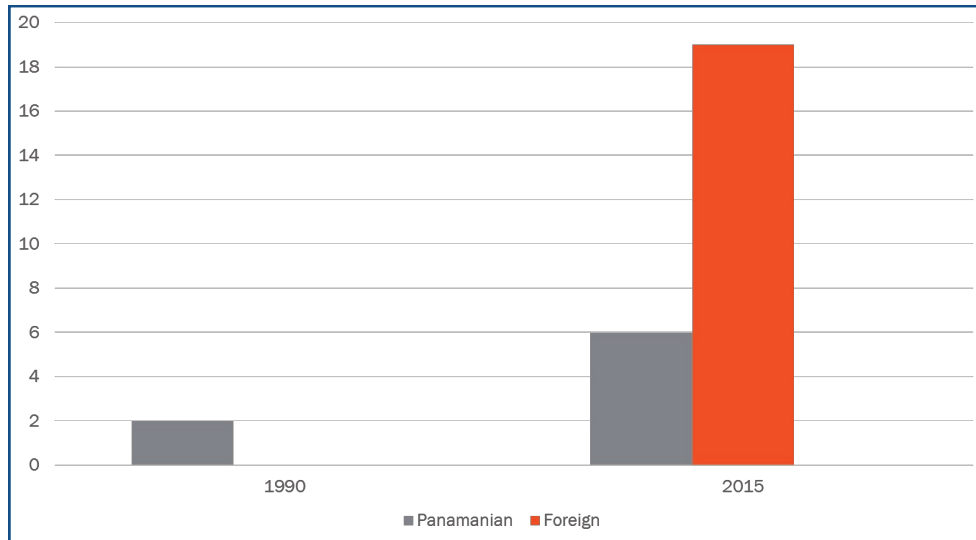
Santa Catalina does not have a high school, and the average level of education there is nine years.

However, in the last twenty years, and particularly in the last ten, tourism in Santa Catalina has increased exponentially. The road to Santa Catalina is now fully paved, and tourists frequent Santa Catalina not only to surf but also to scuba dive and snorkel and go to Coiba National Park, a beautiful island about 30 miles offshore. Today, almost all of the beach front property has been bought up by foreigners, mostly by an American company. (Even the police station now rents its space from them). As illustrated in Figure 1, there are over twenty-five hotels in Santa Catalina, over three quarters of which are foreign-owned. The first scuba shop was opened by a residential tourist entrepreneur in 2003, and now there are also several other water sport shops (kayaking, surfing, scuba diving) for a total of some ten water sport shops, eight of which are foreign-owned (see Figure 2).

My methodological approach in this project is primarily ethnographic. Over the past two years, I have been documenting ownership of small lodgings and water sport operations in Santa Catalina. In interviews ranging from ten minutes to two hours, I have talked to the Panamanian-owned small lodgings and water sport operators in Santa Catalina about their businesses and employees, and local tourism in general. I also interviewed the local pastor of the Evangelical Church (the only church in Santa Catalina)<sup>[2]</sup>, as well as an American couple who are full-time missionaries, and

2. There is also a Catholic church in town, but it is not used because it does not have a priest.

**Figure 1 : Small Lodging Owner / Operators, Santa Catalina, Panama**



about a dozen international volunteers. In addition to these informal conversations and in-depth interviews, I also engaged in participant observation. As a frequent lodger at a locally-owned small lodgings operation and customer at a locally-owned water sport shop, I paid particular attention to interactions between locals and foreigners, including international volunteers.

This research was undertaken in April 2014, July 2014, January 2015, and April 2015.

**International Volunteers and Missionaries in Santa Catalina**

*International Volunteerism*

Most of the research on international volunteerism focuses on the motivation of international volunteers,

i.e. why they choose this type of holiday. Morgan (n/d) and others acknowledge that international volunteers also often express a secular, rational motivation: ‘a way to travel cheap’; however, they insist that most international volunteers also have more existential, value-laden (spiritual) motivations: (1) getting to know themselves, or becoming ‘better’ people; and (2) ‘helping the world’. This is precisely what I found in my discussions with international volunteers in Santa Catalina, Panama. Volunteers emphasize that when they travel they are ‘not that interested in seeing the sites’, but, rather, in ‘getting to know’ themselves, as one young American woman in her twenties stated. Others explicitly mention that they ‘want to help’. For instance, one American couple in their forties who were volunteers at a dive centre had just completed a six-month volunteer stint in Ghana. They found striking parallels between Panama and Ghana, and they

**Figure 2: Water Sport Shop Owner / Operators**



Figure 3 : International Volunteer Website



were eager to help educate Santa Catalina locals about environmental issues as they had in Ghana before.

It is precisely this type of transcendent motivation that explains why, defined in a very broad way, international volunteerism can be considered a form of 'secular pilgrimage'; for the purpose of secular pilgrimage is to transcend oneself and develop connections with humankind (Graburn 1989). In point of fact, as shown in Figure 3, the website that the dive shop used to find the international volunteers with whom I spoke reflects this same sacred imagery. The website address 'GoodWork.ca' connotes the Biblical phrase 'good works':

*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 5:16 - see Figure 3).

The accompanying photos of a young man on a mountain top, and hands holding plants connote self-discovery and, literally, 'helping hands' (see Figure 3).

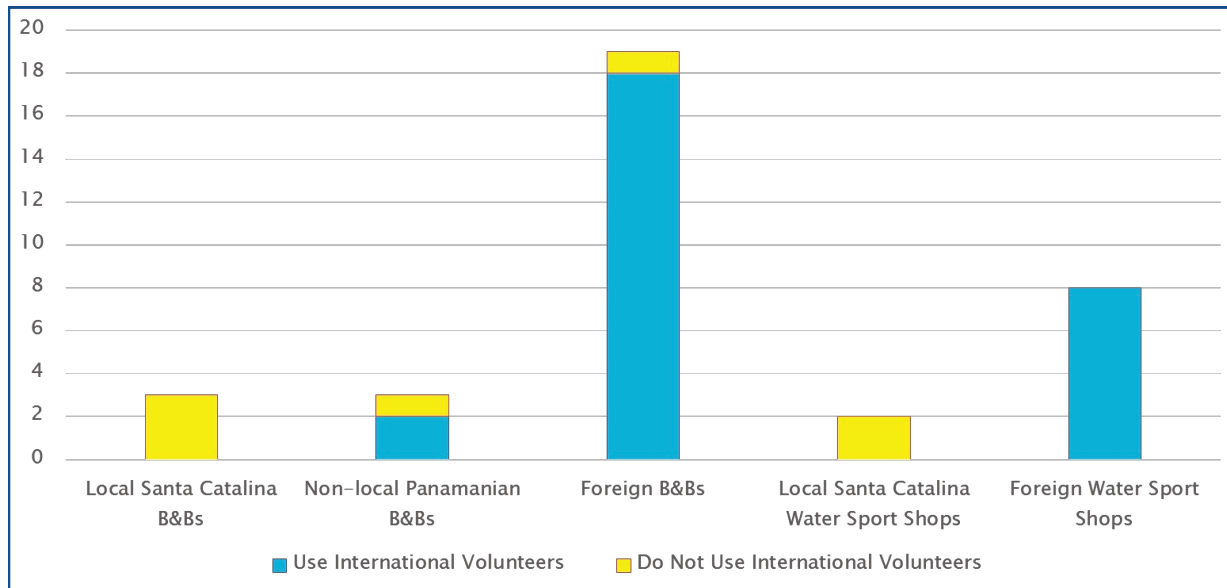
It is of utmost significance that this sacred imagery is used to solicit volunteers to work not for a humanitarian or non-profit organization, but for a (secular) profit-driven business. Thus, even using Graburn's broad definition of secular pilgrimage, one might take a cynical point of view and reject the secular pilgrimage label in favour of a market-oriented perspective in which the *illusion* of sacrality is

propagated for economic gain, i.e. to secure free labour. Because labour is exchanged for room (and sometimes board, or other equivalencies, such as dive trips), entrepreneurs who use international volunteers pay no taxes and no social security. Although there are legal restrictions in Panama as to the kinds of work foreigners can do (they are only supposed to do work that locals cannot do because they do not have the necessary qualifications, such as English language or computer skills), and a legal limit on the ratio of foreign to local employees, international volunteers often engage in a wide variety of tasks, from menial to specialized, and because they frequently come and go, they can slide under bureaucratic and governmental radars.

As shown in Figure 4, this is one of the fundamental differences between local- and foreign-owned small tourist businesses in Santa Catalina: local entrepreneurs do not use international volunteers. Specifically, while none of the Santa-Catalinan-owned tourist businesses (three hostels and two snorkelling shops) use international volunteers, almost all of the foreign-owned small lodgings operations and water sport shops (some eighteen out of nineteen hostels/hotels and eight out of eight water sport shops), as well as two of the three non-Santa Catalinan, Panamanian-owned small lodgings operations use international volunteers<sup>[3]</sup> (whether or not they employ locals as well). To be sure, this has a lot to do with the *size* of

3. In my research I distinguish between small lodgings operations owned and operated by Santa Catalina locals, and small-lodgings operations owned and operated by Panamanians who are not from Santa Catalina. The latter tend to come from wealthy families and own property both inside and outside of Santa Catalina, and hence have a higher socioeconomic status and significantly different lifestyle than local Santa Catalinans. Panamanian small lodgings entrepreneurs who are not from Santa Catalina are 'betwixt and between' locals and foreigners in other ways as well. For instance, they tend to have significant international experience (such as living and working in the United States, and/or marrying foreigners), and hence comfortably engage both with locals and foreigners. In point of fact, two of the three Panamanian small lodgings operators not from Santa Catalina employ foreigners and / or utilize international volunteers.

Figure 4 : Use of International Volunteers



operations. For instance, not coincidentally, it is the smallest foreign-owned small lodgings operation that has never used any international volunteers; they do not have any employees at all.

#### *Missionaries in Santa Catalina*

Jason and Brenda<sup>[4]</sup> are a young missionary couple who have been in Santa Catalina for about six years. They help organize Christian youth trips (about five to eight a year), in which foreigners come either as a church group, or with organizations such as 'Christian Surfers' (christiansurfers.org) and undertake projects to assist the local community<sup>[5]</sup>. For instance, one service project entailed replacing the dirt floors in families' homes with cement floors. Jason said that his goal was to replace every dirt floor in Santa Catalina with a cement floor.

In addition to his involvement with Christian mission groups, Jason gives surfing lessons to travellers who come to Santa Catalina via a secular, humanitarian organization. Most interestingly, Jason described this organization as doing

*mission trips without religion.*

He states that the kids

*travel with a purpose. They do service projects.*

Their goal is to

*immerse the students in the culture, and change their mind-set.*

Moreover, though initially Jason had only given surfing lessons to youths travelling with this secular,

humanitarian organization, he recently began organizing their service projects as well. Therefore, the next group that comes to Santa Catalina from the secular organization will also be pouring concrete, i.e. they will be doing *exactly the same work* as the participants who come on 'mission trips.'

Given that secular and religiously-motivated international volunteers are doing exactly the same work, organized by the same person, it should come as no surprise that Santa Catalina locals tend not to differentiate between secular and religiously-motivated tourists. For instance, it is not uncommon for locals to mis-identify foreigners, using the term 'missionaries' to refer to people who come from the secular organizations. To me, this parallels another trend: although foreigners in Santa Catalina implicitly sort themselves into various categories (the 'newly arrived' and the 'old guard;' those who 'live' there as opposed to rank and file tourists who pass through), the locals tend not to make such distinctions. For Santa Catalinans, foreigners are tourists. They do not become 'locals' no matter how long they stay. Foreigners will always be foreigners.

The tendency to lump all foreigners together and differentiate them from locals became readily apparent to me in my conversation with the local evangelical pastor. In our two hour conversation about the evangelical church in Santa Catalina, she never mentioned or brought up the missionaries, or the missionary groups that come to the town. My interpretation of this omission is that we were talking specifically about the history and role of the evangelical church in the community - the topic was not foreigners and what they were doing. The pastor spoke to me for more than an hour about how the

4. These are pseudonyms.

5. Mission groups range in size from ten to forty people. They usually stay for 4-10 days in Santa Catalina, and while they are there they also enjoy the sites and surf.

church tackles social problems in the community (e.g. drugs and alcohol), but she never once mentioned the foreign missionaries (who, as indicated previously, had been in town for six years), the mission trips, or international volunteers. After we had been talking for about an hour and a half, I asked her about the foreigners who come on mission trips, mentioning that I had seen a group of them staying on the second floor of her church (which is still unfinished) the previous year. She said that mission groups regularly come through Santa Catalina and that she lets them use the church for whatever they need. She indicated that sometimes the groups will stay at the church if they don't have enough housing. She said that the group there that week was working on replacing dirt floors with cement floors in a few homes, but she never referred to any foreign missionaries by name. She *did* make it clear, however, that she had nothing to do with their projects; that was 'their own thing'.

When I asked Jason and Brenda about their relationship with locals and the pastor, and specifically if locals were involved in their mission projects, Jason said no, they [locals] were 'not interested.' Jason said his approach is to always to 'try to include them,' but they do not usually participate.

*I tell them what I am going to do and ask them to join me, but if they don't, well, I just do it anyway.'*

I also asked him if the people whose houses they fix have to pay anything or help with putting in the cement floor (*a la* Habitat for Humanity) and he said no,

*they don't have to pay anything or do anything except give us access to their house.*

Two important issues are reflected in these comments. First, these comments reflect a sharp distinction between the (foreign) 'helper' and the (local) 'helped', which parallels, and is part and parcel of, a deeper separation between foreigners and locals in Santa Catalina. This separation between locals and foreigners is social and socio-economic while also being geographic / spatial. For instance, it is not uncommon for residential tourists to admit that they are not immersed in the town (*'no estoy metido en el pueblo'*) as one foreign hostel owner who had been living for ten years in Santa Catalina states. This comment was meant geographically as well as socially, as residential tourists tend to hang out with each other at the far end of town, while locals tend to congregate with each other in more central locations.

Of course, the separation between locals and foreigners is also socio-economic. There are significant differences between foreigners and locals in relation to economic and cultural capital, as well as 'habitus'<sup>[6]</sup>, to use Pierre Bourdieu's terms. Regarding this paper, the point is not only that foreigners are perceived as 'having money' (which tends to be true) but there is a common perception that they should use it to employ locals, thus it is a sore point when foreigners employ other foreigners as either paid employees or as volunteers. Interestingly, the notion that foreigners *should* employ locals parallels the perception of missionaries and humanitarian organizations that they *should* help local Santa Catalinans (though many locals are critical of the notion that locals *need* help from the missionaries).

Interestingly, this distinction between foreigners and locals and the 'helpers' and the 'helped' also parallels the way that politicians help locals during election campaigns. Specifically, Panamanian politicians do not just hand out the same mass-produced product to everyone whose votes they seek; rather, they actually ask what people need and then provide it to them in order to promote good will (and hopefully a vote). But, the politicians do not know if individuals will vote, or did in fact vote for them. Similarly, the missionaries and humanitarian organizations are also perceived as addressing authentic needs. In this case, many local Santa Catalinans are only too pleased to have a cement floor rather than a dirt floor, and just as it is normative to accept things from politicians, even though they are aware that the gifts are politically motivated, so, too, it is normative to accept gifts from international volunteers. *Why* the individual is helping them, i.e. whether the motivation is to secure their votes (politicians), or to bring them to God (missionaries), or because they just want to help (secular volunteers/missionaries) is a non-issue. It is irrelevant to those receiving the 'help'.

The separation between foreigners and locals is also readily apparent in the Chamber of Tourism, which is composed almost exclusively of foreigners as well as a few non-Santa Catalinan Panamanians. For many foreign business owners, the fact that local business owners are not involved in the Chamber of Tourism is a sore point. Residential tourist entrepreneurs emphasize that the membership cost of one hundred dollars per year is a very small sum for a business; moreover, the Chamber provides 'scholarships' for

6. Bourdieu (1979;1984;1980;1990) defines:

*'economic capital'* as the material resources such as land, wealth, or money that one possesses and that can be used to advance one's position;

*'cultural capital'* as nonmaterial goods, such as education credentials, types of knowledge and expertise, verbal skills, and aesthetic preferences that can be converted into economic capital or otherwise used to one's advantage; and

*'habitus'* as a mental filter that structures an individual's perceptions, experiences, and practices such that the world takes on a taken-for-granted, commonsense appearance (see Appelrouth and Edles 2015, pp. 418-454).

local businesses that lack the resources to join. Says one member of the Chamber of Tourism about the lack of involvement of local business owners in the Chamber,

*They [local business owners] are really negative. They don't even want to do anything about something everyone agrees is a problem, like the water situation.*

She told a story about asking people to sign a petition to try to do something about the water, and there was resistance because the petition said 'Chamber of Tourism' at the top. Now she doesn't even bother to talk to these local business owners and says:

*They can form their own group.*

This is a common refrain amongst foreigners in Santa Catalina: they complain that locals are 'not interested' in fixing up their own houses, or cleaning up their own beach and town.

From the point of view of locals, however, the Chamber of Tourism is a group [of foreigners] with which they have no desire to be affiliated. One local business owner told me that not only are locals uninvolved in the recycling program started by the Chamber of Tourism, but that he has seen locals deliberately drop trash right behind the groups doing trash pick-ups as they go by. My interpretation of this behaviour is that the garbage pick-ups are symbolic of foreigner arrogance and intrusion. To deliberately sabotage them is an expression of local resistance: who are *you* to tell me what is a problem in *my* community? 'Who are you to assert what it means to *care*?'

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the impact of secular international volunteers and short-term missionaries in Santa Catalina is similar in that both are perceived as 'foreigners.' They are not distinguished from each other in part because they are doing literally the same work and in part because there are significant gaps and strain in the relationships between foreigners and locals in general. Individuals who become international volunteers because it is a means to travel economically, or who become international volunteers because of more 'sacred' intentions, or who come to Santa Catalina on short-term or long-term mission trips, or who come simply to surf or see the sights are not differentiated. Indeed, not only are full-time missionaries not perceived differently from foreign business owners who have patently economic goals, the missionaries are likewise perceived as engaged in 'business': locals assume that that is how the latter are earning a living (by organizing mission trips). In exactly the same way, foreigners who help with beach clean-ups (whether they are international volunteers, missionaries or residential tourist entrepreneurs) are not differentiated from tourists who come to surf (and, again, they are often the same folks). Foreigners often expect locals to come to know them and appreciate them for their love of Santa Catalina, especially if they have been there for several months or even years. But locals emphasize that once Santa Catalina is over-developed or once foreigners lose interest in Santa Catalina, foreigners can--and will, and do--go elsewhere. Locals are people who will stay in Santa Catalina no matter what because they have no other place to go<sup>[7]</sup>.

7. This is also precisely why local Santa Catalinans tend not to think of Panamanians who are not from Santa Catalina but who have businesses in Santa Catalina as (authentically) 'local.'; The latter all own property outside of Santa Catalina as well, and do not live in Santa Catalina full-time. This is also why in my work I differentiate non-local Panamanians from (local) Santa Catalinans.



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