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# Perceived effects of Volunteer Tourism in Rio de Janeiro's *favela* Community of Rocinha: Working towards Best Practice in Sustainable Tourism

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study in progress is to begin to investigate: (a) the differences between mass tourism, *favela* tours, and volunteer tourism within Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; (b) to identify if members of the community perceive the differences between these types of tourists within their community; (c) to identify if community residents perceive volunteer tourism as beneficial or detrimental to their community; (d) and to identify why NGOs use volunteer tourism as a community development strategy in the community of Rocinha. The method of the future study will be constructed using a semi-structured, open-ended interview questionnaire with qualified informants, and participant observations on volunteer projects with several nongovernmental organizations. It is expected that this proposed research will have significant management implications for volunteer tourism management and community development strategies.

Keywords: volunteer tourism; slum tourism; sustainable community development; sustainable tourism; social impacts of volunteer tourism; nongovernmental organizations

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism in general has the potential for alleviating the impacts of poverty on a community because of the potential infrastructure and economic development that stem from this industry (Blake, Arbache, Sinclair, & Teles, 2008; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). Tourism also has the potential to effect the community in a negative way (McGehee, 2007; McGehee & Andereck, 2009). Recently, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to use volunteer tourism as a strategy toward funding poverty reduction and community development projects. Research suggests that residents have a positive attitude toward tourism development (Andereck & Vogt, 2000), but are concerned that negative social and environmental impacts may affect their community (Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990). It is important to make sure residents are informed about the various types of tourism development and their positive and negative attributes (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Perdue, et al., 1990). Research in this area should look critically at tourism costs and benefits to the host community because of the way groups have been marginalized in the past including indigenous groups and communities of lower economic status.

Volunteer tourism is a new area of study in leisure behavior research, and much of the sociological work is focused on the individual tourist and the part that tourism plays in establishing

individual identity and a sense of self (S Wearing, Deville, & Lyons, 2008), while research in the area of community perceptions toward volunteer tourism is just beginning to emerge (McGehee & Andereck, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2004). My research presents an exciting opportunity to expand research in the area of community development, NGOs' part in developing volunteer tourism, enhancing our understanding of community residents' perspectives of volunteer tourism and their perceptions of the effects of tourism within their communities. The goal of this proposed study is to push beyond the existing tourism related literature in order to connect ideas, theories, and trends in the broader community development and tourism development arenas. Furthermore, it is hoped that this proposed study will begin to apply community development research theories and the concept of sustainable livelihood toward tourism development (S Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005) that will help identify volunteer tourism costs and benefits to the host community. This study will involve nongovernmental organizations that are currently using volunteer tourism as a community development strategy in the *favela* (shantytown) community of Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The purpose of this proposed study is to begin to investigate: (a) the differences between mass tourism, *favela* tours, and volunteer tourism within Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; (b) to identify if members of the community perceive the differences between these types of tourists within their community; (c) to identify if community residents perceive volunteer tourism as beneficial or detrimental to their community; (d) and to discover why NGOs use volunteer tourism as a community development strategy in Rocinha.

#### Research Questions

This study is an exploratory research project that will begin in July 2011 and will address the following questions:

- RQ1. How do volunteer tourists effect the host community directly and indirectly as perceived by residents?
  - a. How much of an effect does the volunteer tourist have on the host community compared to other forms of tourism as perceived by residents?
- RQ2. What are the host community residents' perceptions of the volunteer tourist?
- RQ3. What are the host community residents' perceptions of the *favela* tours?
- RQ4. How does the interaction with the different types of tourists influence support for tourism development or support for the NGOs?

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While it can be argued if volunteer tourism can be a "good thing" for the local community or if it has a any real significant positive impact, a much deeper look at the different types of tourism in a community is needed in order to address this argument and to justify the need for research in the area of sustainable tourism and community based tourism development. For example, tourism money has the potential for building community capital within a host community; however, little is known about how the community perceives the volunteer tourist in relation to other forms of tourism. In addition, within the past decade there has been the development of *favela* tours in the community of Rocinha (Freire-Medeiros, 2009a; Jaguaribe & Hetherington, 2004). It is yet not known if the community members of Rocinha perceive differences between volunteer tourism, *favela* tours, or mass tourism; nor is it known if they prefer one form of tourism to another within their community. Research in the area of sustainable tourism is critical to minimize the potentially detrimental impacts that may occur in the host community, particularly in communities that have been marginalized in the past such as the *favelas* of Brazil. Additionally, research is lacking in the area of understanding how nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) use volunteer tourists as a strategy for community development and to address community livelihood needs. There is a need for more research in the areas of understanding the constraints that volunteer tourism has in meeting livelihood goals of the community and its impacts on the community residents.

Leisure and tourism research have acknowledged peoples' desire to seek the 'authentic' experience (S Wearing, et al., 2005). However, at times this need to seek the 'authentic' has led the tourism industry to develop a 'created authentic' experience which aims to address the tourist needs and desires rather than those of the community. *Favela* tourism operators have created a niche market for themselves and claim to offer the 'authentic' experience for travelers who are seeking the 'off the beaten track' experience and claiming to be sustainable while offering little evidence of this. For example, Freire-Medeiros argues that the advent of *favela* tours in Rio de Janeiro has created the *favela* as a global trademark (Freire-Medeiros, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Tourists are led on a guided tour through the streets of some of Rio's famous *favelas* where the tour operators sell the 'authentic' Rio experience by allowing the tourist to view the 'Other' (Freire-Medeiros, 2009a). If not managed correctly this kind of tourism has the potential to commodify poor communities, where images of shantytowns can be sold globally and the experience marketed as adventurous and authentic.

#### Mass tourism vs. alternative tourism

Mass tourism is seen by many as purely hedonic consumption of sun, sex, and sand of a geographic location; where the word 'tourist' is seen as a pejorative and where the person is stereotyped as someone who disrupts the lives of the host community (Crick, 1989). Additionally, there is acknowledgement within the tourism literature that mass tourism marginalizes the host community since they have little or no ability to influence or control its development (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). This realization within the tourism industry has created a demand for a sustainable alternative form of tourism.

Alternative tourism is defined as a form of tourism that rejects the consumerism attitude of mass tourism and offers an alternative experience, which is a more socially and environmentally sustainable (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; S Wearing, 2001). This demand for alternative forms of tourism has led to a diverse variety of products and services, which can overlap in definition, type of tourism activity, and experience. For example, Timothy and Boyd (2003) explain that heritage tourism, a subset of alternative tourism, flows between a variety of settings and activities from the urban/built environment to the pristine, natural environment. Adding to this concept, volunteer tourism is encompassed within the heritage tourism realm because it shares similar landscapes and attractions, in addition to sharing similar values and significances which Hall and McArthur identify (1993) and are highlighted by Timothy and Boyd (2003). *Favela* tours, described here as a subset of reality tours, is placed within the realm of the heritage landscape. However, it can be argued that it may be tilted more towards the definition of mass tourism rather than alternative tourism as described by Lyons and Wearing (2008) and by S. Wearing (2001). For example, the concern with *favela* tours is that the tour operators claim that they are part of the alternative tourism industry because they help bring awareness of the *favelados* on a global level and help bring potential tourists to the *favelas* that will patronize their business (Freire-Medeiros, 2009a). A preliminary investigation conducted by Aquino (2011) has shown that representatives of NGOs who were interviewed expressed a concern with some of the tour operators who might inaccurately claim that they are from Rocinha but may have grown up outside of the community.

## Volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism, seen by researchers as a subset of alternative tourism, has been defined in the academic literature as tourists who “volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment” (S Wearing, 2001, p. 1). There is a belief that volunteer tourism provides a mutually beneficial form of travel where both the volunteer and the host communities gain from the experience (Raymond & Hall, 2008).

### Volunteer tourism – effects on local communities

Within the tourism literature there are many examples of positive impacts of volunteer tourism, with the majority of the examples addressing the benefits gained by the tourist. However, much less of the literature has addressed the positive or negative impacts of volunteer tourism on a community. Additionally, there is no research in the area of local community residents’ perception of how the NGOs should be regulated or how they should manage volunteer tourists and projects. Nevertheless, there is emerging research in the area of resident attitudes toward volunteer tourism (McGehee & Andereck, 2009), the perceptions of residents regarding the community impacts of volunteer tourists (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004), and the NGOs’ agenda in tourism development (S Wearing, et al., 2005). Additionally, recent work conducted by McGehee and Andereck (2008), has outlined the positive and negative impacts of volunteer tourism on the community based on interviews with local NGOs and community residents of West Virginia, USA and Tijuana, Mexico. Their work begins to inform NGOs of the types of management actions that need to take place in order to maximize both resources and the quality of the experience, from the perspectives of both the volunteers and the volunteer providers.

### Tourism, cultural exchange and consciousness-raising

Volunteer tourism can offer an opportunity where the volunteer tourist becomes enlightened and develops social networks, and creates consciousness-raising within the volunteer tourist at both a global and local level (McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Norman, 2002). For example, “volunteer tourism presents a unique opportunity for exposure to social inequalities, as well as environmental and political issues, subsequently increasing social awareness, sympathy, and/or support” (McGehee & Santos, 2005, p. 764). However, I argue that this is not a one-way direction. In fact, in order to have an interaction both the volunteer tourist and the community resident must share knowledge, ideas, and experiences with each other. Researching the community’s perspective on volunteer tourism would add a much needed knowledge to the community based tourism development and sustainable community development literature.

Tourism is a global phenomenon with much of the sociological work in this area focused on the individual tourist and the part that tourism plays on establishing individual identity and a sense of self. Furthermore, the shift away from tourist experiences as a passive bystander towards an active participant contributes greatly towards the tourist experiences. For example, social interaction with the host community and other members of volunteer organization are essential elements that contribute to the social exchange of the tourist’s experiences (S. Wearing & Neil, 2000). Volunteer tourism has the potential to develop better cross-cultural understanding for the volunteer tourist and the residents, if managed well. Tourism development should have a goal of providing meaningful, interactive, and authentic experiences for both the tourist and the resident (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Raymond & Hall, 2008).

## Nongovernmental Organizations and their link to tourism

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are seen as the main advocates for marginalized communities. In addition, NGOs have put into practice the use of sustainable development. In addition they have played a major role in volunteer tourism by placing volunteers that will assist community projects while also allowing programs to be controlled at the local level that aid sustainable tourism development practices (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; S Wearing, et al., 2005). Wearing, et al., (2005) argues that NGOs provide a 'decommodified' alternative to the 'commodified' version of tourism known as mass tourism. For example, NGOs seek to decommodify the tourism industry by placing the priority on the host community maximizing the quality of the interaction between the tourist and the resident members of the community (Wearing, et al., 2005).

Research in Rocinha offers a perfect opportunity to look at tourism through a community development perspective of the tourism industry and to critically analyze the NGOs' role in the tourism industry. Research in this area will help gain an understanding of the best practices in engaging and empowering the community towards sustainable community development. Additionally, Wearing, et al., further argues that the "full breadth of social science research paradigms needs to be utilized in tourism research to ensure a thorough and competent exploration of issues regarding these phenomena, particularly as they apply to NGOs and other roles in tourism" (2005, p. 425). Using this suggestion, I propose that we look at tourism and NGOs participation in the tourism industry through the paradigm of community development while considering the sustainable livelihoods framework as a holistic approach in the community of Rocinha.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

Using the sustainable livelihoods framework created by Ashley and Carney (1999) we can look at the unique needs of the community of Rocinha such as the need for health services, public schools, and proper sanitation (Jaguaribe & Hetherington, 2004); and stereotyped images of the residents of the *favelas* from both the international media and the local middle and upper class, which have added to the community's vulnerabilities. Additionally, the livelihoods framework can be used as a way to structure the concept of how alternative tourism and NGOs are used as a way of diversifying the community's economy while also investigating how NGOs address the community's vulnerabilities. In order to guide us to an understanding how the livelihoods framework can be useful, an explanation of what is community development should be presented first.

Community development (CD) and sustainable community development (SCD) have been used interchangeably. For example, Vincent II defined CD as a broad subject, interdisciplinary in nature, and based on the idea that community development is inclusive: "CD is based on the idea that all people are important and should have a voice in community decisions, have a potential to contribute, resources to share, and a responsibility for community action and outcomes" (2009, p. 60). In the United Kingdom sustainable community is defined as, "safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all" (McDonald, Malys, & Malien 2009, p. 50). Community based tourism planning also follows the same development values and beliefs as community development, or sustainable community development within the United States (Vincent II, 2009) and within Brazil (Buarque, 2006).

### Community Based Tourism

Community based tourism (CBT), or community driven tourism planning, is based on a community centered approach, which aims to create a sustainable industry that relies on the

involvement of the host community from the beginning stages of tourism development planning and throughout the continuing maintenance of tourism development (Blackstock, 2005; Hall, 1991). Community based tourism has been used in communities as a strategy toward diversifying the local economy while also providing greater self-reliance and increasing local services (Murphy, 1988).

Using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework we can place a diversification of income based on tourism development as a way that the local residents earn extra income or the potential of increased wages. However, CBT should not be seen as a way for big outside business to exploit vulnerable communities such as lower income communities, rather, CBT should be seen as a way that the community can gain a potential for creating and sustaining their own businesses. While working in the tourism industry in general can be seen as a livelihood strategy, we should look at CBT development holistically in order to know how to better manage development and keep it oriented towards the betterment of the community. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework can help guide the community towards achieving CBT goals.

Additionally, NGOs in the tourism industry currently use volunteer tourist as one of the means of providing assistance towards community development in the form of getting projects accomplished or alleviated symptoms of poverty such as providing better education for children, building infrastructure such as schools, and providing accessible resources such as health care and health care education. Additionally, NGOs help build and sustain the current rich assets that the community members have, such as cultural heritage in the form of arts, dance, music, food, fashion, and cultural traditions.

### Social Exchange Theory

Resident attitude research in tourism is one of the most studied areas of tourism that attempts to predict the attitude of community residents toward tourism development. However, there is little to no research in the area of the perceptions and attitudes of residents who are exposed to volunteer tourists and *favela* tours (or reality tours) (Freire-Medeiros, 2010; McGehee & Andereck, 2009). The majority of the residential attitude studies have used social exchange theory as a theoretical framework.

Social exchange theory is defined as a sociological theory that focuses on understanding the interaction and exchange of resources between individuals and groups (Ap, 1992). McGehee and Andereck (2009) have applied this theory to volunteer tourism development and argue that perceived personal benefits of volunteer tourism will be a strong predictor of support for additional volunteer tourism development, while a lack of perceived benefit predicts a lack of support.

## METHODS

This proposed study will use a community development approach to identify the community members' perceived impacts of alternative tourism development. This will allow the residents to be treated as "the experts" on their own views of the volunteer tourist. The method of the study will be constructed using different strategies such as a semi-structured, open-ended interview questionnaire with qualified informants, and participant observation on volunteer projects with several nongovernmental organizations.

Data collection will be conducted on site in the *favela* community of Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. I will be working with several NGOs in purposefully selecting respondents who are permanent residents of the *favela* and who have had direct interactions with volunteer tourists. I will use a qualitative, semi-structured interview to gather information from at least 25 individuals or until theoretical saturation has

been reached. Within the methodological literature it has been shown that interviewing at least 25 individuals will increase the likelihood of saturation of themes (Creswell, 2007). In addition, semi-structured interviews will be collected from representatives of NGOs working in the *favela* communities of Rio de Janeiro who use volunteer tourists to run their community development projects and programs. Data collection will begin in July 2011 and end in September 2011. Appropriate human subjects protocol will be followed. Participants will be asked to volunteer their information and I will explain that their responses will be kept confidential.

Interviews will be audiotape recorded and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of information. Data analysis will begin in October 2011 and follow a general guideline of analysis that looks for significant phrases and meanings that will be clustered into themes which will later be presented in an in-depth description of the phenomenon by May 2012.

## EXPECTED RESULTS

A much deeper look at the different types of tourism in a community is needed in order to address the argument if volunteer tourism is beneficial for the local community or if it has any significant positive impact. Rural communities are looking towards tourism as an economic development strategy and most studies indicate that residents have an overall positive attitude toward tourism and tourism development (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Nicholas, Thapa, & Ko, 2009). However, research is lacking in the area of urban communities and their perception of tourism economic development strategies and community development strategies. In addition, research on rural communities has shown that residents are concerned about social and environmental costs that may affect them (Chen, 2000; Perdue, et al., 1990). Therefore, it is important to make sure that residents are informed about the various types of tourism development that exist (Andereck, et al., 2005; Chen, 2000; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Perdue, et al., 1990). Furthermore, research is lacking in the area of understanding how NGOs use volunteer tourists as a strategy for community development and to address community livelihood needs. Research in this area will help to better understand the benefits of this form of tourism in a community while also investigating the current constraints that volunteer tourism might have in meeting livelihood goals of the community and its impacts on the community residents. It is expected that this proposed research will have significant management implications towards volunteer tourism management and community development strategies.

## REFERENCES