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Volunteer Tourists' Motivation and Satisfaction: A Case of Batu Puteh Village Kinabatangan Borneo

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism experiences represent a combination of both voluntary work and travel. The success of a volunteer program lies in its ability to create a balance between opportunities to learn, experience new things, have fun, and contribute to worthwhile projects. Using the Volunteer Program at Batu Puteh Village in Kinabatangan, Malaysian Borneo as the case study, the present study determines the factors that drive individuals to participate in the program. It also examines volunteer tourists' satisfaction with their volunteer tourism experiences. Additionally, the present study looks at the relationship between volunteer tourists' satisfaction level and their behavioral intention. The results of the study demonstrate that volunteer tourists of the Batu Puteh Volunteer Program came with a desire to experience something completely new and to interact with local people. The study also reveals a significant difference between the expectations and perceptions of the volunteer tourism experience attributes. Despite the gap, the overall satisfaction level leans toward the high point of the satisfaction scale, suggesting that Batu Puteh Village provides a satisfactory volunteer tourism experience.

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1. Introduction

The changing dynamic of tourism has created a trend where tourists seek purpose and meaning in their holidays,

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giving birth to a tourism phenomenon known as volunteer tourism (VT). This form of travel usually attracts volunteers from across the globe to such places as biological reserves, rainforests and conservation areas. Africa, Central and South Americas as well as Asia have become the major hotspots for VT. Slogans like ‘Want to really make a difference?’ (Earthwatch) and ‘It is the Experience of a Lifetime’ (Cross-Cultural Solutions) can generate enormously different expectations among volunteer tourists.

This is particularly true if clear explanations of the VT trips are absent. Coren and Gray (2011) reported that volunteer tourists to Vietnam and Thailand conveyed hard criticisms of their respective Volunteer Tourism Organizations (VTOs) because their expectations were not matched with the realities of the projects that they were involved in. Specifically, their personal expectations to gain an experience linked to environmental issues and to have a direct contact with the local communities were not met (Sirasoonthorn & Coren, 2010). This situation confirms Coghlan’s (2007) viewpoint that “a mismatch between the volunteers’ expectations and their actual experiences may lead to decreased satisfaction levels and lowered volunteer motivation and commitment.” Therefore, a sound understanding of volunteer tourists’ satisfaction is critical in order to be able to develop good volunteer programs, increase the number of enrolled volunteers, create a higher possibility of repeat volunteers and elicit positive recommendations. Research on VT has not been new. Nevertheless, literature on the subject has primarily focused on the benefits of VT, and extensive studies have simply entailed the profiling of volunteers or the investigating of their motivations (Brown, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Wearing 2001; Chen & Chen, 2011). Thus, the present study fills the gap in the literature by examining volunteer tourists’ expectations and perceptions and by looking at the relationship between volunteer tourists’ satisfaction and their behavioural intention, specifically the intention to re-visit and to recommend.

2. Background

2.1. Volunteer tourism

VT industry has grown in importance since the 1970s (Wearing, 2004). The roots of voluntary activities date back to the 19th century when the altruistic and missionary movements attempted to control the explicit class divisions in society. Both the volunteer sector and international tourism experienced significant growth during the late 20th century (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). There is a wide range of VT definitions (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Wearing, 2001, 2002). The most commonly cited definition reflects Wearing’s (2001) definition of volunteer tourists as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment”. People engaging in VT pay to travel to a location where they choose to engage in a meaningful experience, which generally involves helping local communities or the volunteer host by such means as providing necessities and other resources, restoring and conserving environments, or supporting in field research related to protecting the environment or endangered species of animals (Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001).

2.2. Volunteer motivations

Individuals partaking in voluntary work are usually altruistically motivated (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Wearing & Neil, 1997; Bussell and Forbes, 2002), distinguishing them from the mainstream tourists who are motivated by escapism (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007; Mustonen, 2005). Volunteers are also likely to have egoistic motives. They may be driven by the prospects of excitement, fun, adventure, and meeting others (Gazley, 2001, as cited in Broad, 2003; Bussell & Forbes, 2002). As indicated by Wearing (2001), volunteers usually expect a bi-lateral experience, hoping the experience would not only benefit the host community, but would also contribute to personal development. Cultural immersion, giving back and making a difference to those less privileged, establishing relationships with individuals that share the same interests, seeking educational and bonding opportunities for children, learning about the environment, engaging in conservation work and developing new skills and abilities are other main motivators for volunteer vacationers (Brown, 2005; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Broad, 2003; Broad & Jenkins, 2009; Campbell & Smith, 2006).

2.3. *VT experiences*

VT experiences are a mix of voluntary work and travel-related activities (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001, 2002). They usually entail interactions with the surrounding environment, social interaction with fellow volunteers and local residents, cultural/language exchange, education, relaxation, personal discoveries and new experiences (Coghlan, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2006). Additionally, VT experiences involve a desire to assist others, particularly with poverty alleviation or other social illnesses (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001, 2002). Furthermore, VT experiences can stimulate members to make changes in their lives. Participants gain more confidence, knowledge, skills and learn more about themselves, leading to the development of a different view of life and the world. In other words, VT experiences can create a greater awareness of the “self” and “others”, ultimately translated into a (desired) identity (Broad, 2003; Sin, 2009; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Wearing, 2001, 2002).

2.4. *Batu Puteh Village volunteer program*

Batu Puteh is a sub-district of Kinabatangan District in the East Coast of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Batu Puteh Village is wholly managed by Batu Puteh Community Tourism Cooperative Limited (KOPEL). The village offers a wide range of VT programs ranging from habitat and nature conservation to community work. Nature conservation projects, such as seed collecting, trail restoring, trail cutting, trail building, forest habitat restoration, tree planting, lake restoration and work in nursery, are the major activities participated by the volunteer tourists. Meanwhile, the project durations range from 20 days up to 3 months.

3. **Methods**

Batu Puteh Village was chosen as the study site because of the successful partnership established between the community organization and cooperation with international volunteer tourism organizations including Global Vision International (GVI), Raleigh International, Intrepid and some international universities. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Structured interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with five volunteers who were on site participating in the Batu Puteh Volunteer Program. The sample included all volunteers accustomed with the volunteer program. Quantitative research was conducted with former volunteers of the program via email correspondence (email addresses were obtained from the KOPEL’s database of previous volunteer participants). It was noted that 60 questionnaires were distributed, but only 33 were returned.

3.1. *Demographic profiles of respondents*

As demonstrated in Table 1, the majority of the respondents were female (65.8%), single (76.3%) and aged between 20 and 30 (60.5%). Most of the volunteers were international participants (28.9% British, 23.7% Singaporean, 15.8% Australian and 15.8% American). Most of them possessed graduate degrees (81.6%). Over a quarter (34.2%) worked as professional. There were almost equal numbers of students (26.3%) and academicians/researchers (23.7%). Over half of the respondents (71.1%) were attached with the Global Vision International (GVI) and some (26.3%) with the Student Group (Youth Expedition Project Singapore). Most of the respondents spent two to four weeks volunteering at Batu Puteh Village.

3.2. *Ranking motivation attributes*

As shown in Table 2, the motivational factors of ‘learn’, ‘environmental’ and ‘culture’ were the most important motivational factors. Volunteer tourists at Batu Puteh Village wanted to learn through direct hands-on experience, live and work with the locals, and do something meaningful and make a difference in the lives of others’. This finding corresponds to Yahya’s (2012) and Carter’s (2008) findings that the major motives for VT were meeting and interacting with local people, and exploring new and different things. Moreover, it was discovered that the desire for

new experience outweighed the ‘desire to give back’, supporting Broad’s (2003) findings that motives related to a desire to learn something new were important, but contradicting with Zahra and McIntosh’s (2007) findings that volunteer tourists were chiefly motivated by altruism. The present study also confirms Sirasoonthron and Coren’s (2010) and Coren and Gray’s (2011) findings that relaxation and career were not the major motives to volunteer. Therefore, this study affirms that VT is not always about altruism as volunteers can be categorized as ‘volunteer-minded’ or ‘vacation-minded’.

Table 1. Demographic profiles and travel patterns of respondents (n=38).

	Items	%		Items	%
Gender	Male	34.2	Occupation	Professional	34.2
	Female	65.8		Retiree	7.9
Age	< 20 years	0	Volunteer Organization	Academician/Researcher	23.7
	20 – 30 years	60.5		Self-employed	2.6
	31 - 40 years	10.5		Student	26.3
	41 - 50 years	15.8		Gap-year student	2.6
	> 51 years	13.2		Unemployed	2.6
				Others	0
Marital Status	Single	76.3	Trip Duration	Global Vision International (GVI)	71.1
	Married	10.5		Intrepid	0
	Separated	10.5		Independent Group	2.6
	Divorced	2.6		Student Group (Youth Expedition Project Singapore)	26.3
Nationality	Australian	15.8	Duration	Others	0
	American	15.8		20 days	2.6
	British	28.9		2 weeks	23.7
	Costa Ricans	2.6		3 weeks	21.0
	Netherlander	2.6		4 weeks	31.6
	Swiss	10.5		5 weeks	5.3
	Singaporean	23.7		6 weeks	2.6
Level of Education	High School	0	7 weeks	2.6	
	College/Undergraduate	18.4	1 month	5.3	
	Graduate	81.6	2 months	5.3	

3.3. Expectations and performances gap analysis

Volunteer tourists’ expectations and perceptions were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where higher score denoted greater expectation (perception) of VT experience. As indicated in Table 3, the mean scores of volunteer tourists’ expectations ranged from 2.82 to 4.68. The lowest expectation items fell under Career Enhancement, suggesting that the respondents did not expect their VT experiences would contribute to their future career. Volunteer tourists’ expectations were higher for Authentic Experience, Cultural Engagement and Project Tasks, confirming the importance of proper planning in voluntary projects to ensure the meeting of volunteers’ expectations. The overall mean score for volunteer tourism experience expectation was 3.84, demonstrating that volunteer tourists had rather high expectations for the VT experience. The mean scores of volunteer tourists’ perceptions (performance) ranged from 2.87 to 4.45. The lowest performance items, once again, fell under Career Enhancement, indicating that the respondents did not consider their volunteer experiences would improve their

prospects of obtaining a new job or help in their career. The highest performance items were related to Authentic Experience and Cultural Engagement. The overall mean score for VT experience performance items was 3.74, indicating volunteer tourists had rather high perceptions of VT experiences.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of respondents' volunteer motivation.

Motivation	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Challenge	3.81		5
Be far from home	3.26	0.795	
Be more adventurous than before	3.95	0.985	
Challenge myself and push my limits	4.21	0.963	
2. Culture	4.26		3
Enjoy the country, its history and culture	4.39	0.946	
Make friends	3.87	1.018	
Living and working with the locals	4.53	0.951	
3. Environmental	4.32		2
Protect an area for future generations	4.29	0.927	
Restore natural areas	4.32	0.933	
Concern for the environment	4.34	0.966	
4. Career	2.79		7
Achieve more experience in order to change career	2.71	0.835	
Expand my job opportunity	2.82	0.955	
Make contacts that could help my career	2.84	0.916	
5. Relaxation	3.54		6
Have fun	3.95	1.038	
Be on holiday	3.26	1.083	
Experience peace and calm	3.42	1.030	
6. Learn	4.43		1
Learn something completely new	4.29	0.927	
Learn more about certain animal species	4.37	0.998	
Learn through direct hands-on experience	4.63	0.942	
7. Desire to give back	4.22		4
Show love and care	4.08	0.941	
Provide practical assistance to needy communities	4.18	0.896	
Do something meaningful and make difference in lives of others	4.39	0.946	

Note: ¹Composite mean of motivation: 1 (Strongly unimportant) to 5 (Strongly important); ²Individual mean of motivation: 1 (Strongly unimportant) to 5 (Strongly important)

Table 3 also shows that volunteer tourists' expectations were higher than the performance of VT experiences. The expectation-performance gap was negative for 11 items of the VT experience. The narrowest gap was related to the efficiency of VTO. These low negative gap scores implied that there was a slight difference between performance and expected service, suggesting that these VT attributes were close to the expected experience. However, the widest gap was for the item under Project Tasks, indicating that the respondents expected the VT experiences would motivate them to be interested in and support the project that they were involved in. The overall

gap was 0.10. These results signify that although the overall satisfaction was positive, VT experiences still required extensive improvement. Six items of the VT experiences showed a positive gap mean, indicating higher performance than expectation. The narrowest gap was related to Authentic Experience and the widest gap was related to Cultural Engagement as volunteers made more friends that they had expected. As shown by the results of the paired sample t-test, there was a statistically significant difference between volunteer tourists’ expectation and their performances. Although the narrowest gap was “the organization gives enough information upon departure”, the item was not significantly significant (Sig. 0.39). The biggest negative gap “I am motivated to be interested and support the project” was not statistically significant (Sig. 3.98). For positive gap, the narrowest gap item “experiences relating to self and attained life-changing (cathartic) experiences” was statistically significant (Sig. 0.00) and the widest gap item “making friends” was not statistically significant (Sig. 6.97).

Table 3. Volunteer tourists’ expectation and performance mean value.

Attributes	Expectation		Performance			t-value
	M ¹	SD	M ²	SD	Gap	
Cultural Engagement						
1. Meeting different cultures.	4.24	0.91	4.37	0.63	0.13	1.15
2. Making friends.	3.47	0.89	4.24	0.63	0.76	6.97
3. Learning local language a little.	3.61	0.89	3.79	0.88	0.18	1.05
Project Tasks						
4. The tasks that I am doing match my skills.	3.79	0.96	3.42	1.15	-0.37	-2.06
5. I enjoy the work given each day.	3.79	1.12	3.29	6.97	-0.50	-2.22
6. I am motivated to be interested and support the project.	4.32	0.93	3.47	1.05	-0.84	-3.98
Efficiency of the VTO						
7. The people sold me the project know their job.	4.16	0.97	3.61	0.89	-0.55	-2.60
8. The organization gives enough information upon departure.	3.74	0.92	3.68	0.81	-0.05	-0.39
9. The money I pay is nothing compared to the enjoyment I had with the project.	3.84	1.00	4.03	0.64	0.18	1.27
Career Enhancement						
10. The project would improve my prospect of obtaining new job.	2.95	1.06	2.87	0.88	-0.08	-0.43
11. Make new contacts that might help my career.	2.82	0.90	2.87	0.91	0.05	0.28
12. The project is worth putting on the CV	2.82	0.98	3.42	0.89	0.61	3.54
Personal Achievement						
13. Change in my behaviour when I get home by knowing the problems facing the Earth.	4.24	0.63	3.71	0.57	-0.53	-4.07
14. Contribute to something important.	4.50	0.51	4.05	0.52	-0.45	-3.81
15. Improve my self-esteem.	3.89	0.80	3.47	0.60	-0.42	-2.74
Authentic Experience						
16. Experiences relating to self and attained life-changing (cathartic) experiences.	4.11	0.69	4.11	0.56	0.00	0.00
17. Experiences off the beaten track and see things that many other tourists never see.	4.17	0.46	4.45	0.56	-0.26	-2.93
18. Sincere communication and relationship with the host community and fellow volunteers.	4.68	0.47	4.45	0.56	-0.24	-2.98
Overall mean for 18 attributes	3.84		3.74		0.10	

Note: t-test p<0.05; Expectation means¹ ranges from 1 (Extremely unimportant) to 5 (Extremely important) Performance mean² ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree)

3.4. Importance-performance analysis

Figure 1 shows the importance-expectation matrix developed based upon the means. Volunteer tourists' satisfaction could be divided into low- and high-expectation levels. Similarly, their performance levels could be grouped as lower- and higher-performance levels. In this context, there were four different quadrants in the matrix. The study reveals significant differences between the expectation and performance of VT experience attributes. As a VT destination, Batu Puteh Village had advantages to offer VT experiences that were related to cultural engagement and authentic experiences. The results drawn from the *Keep Up the Good Work* (high performance-high expectation) quadrant support these areas of achievement. This finding is also supported by the open-ended responses given by some volunteers that their best experiences were achieved through the sincere and honest relationship and interactions with the local community, volunteer guides and fellow volunteers. Experiences related to project tasks and personal achievement required greater improvement as the volunteer tourists' pre-trip high expectations were not met by the experiences.

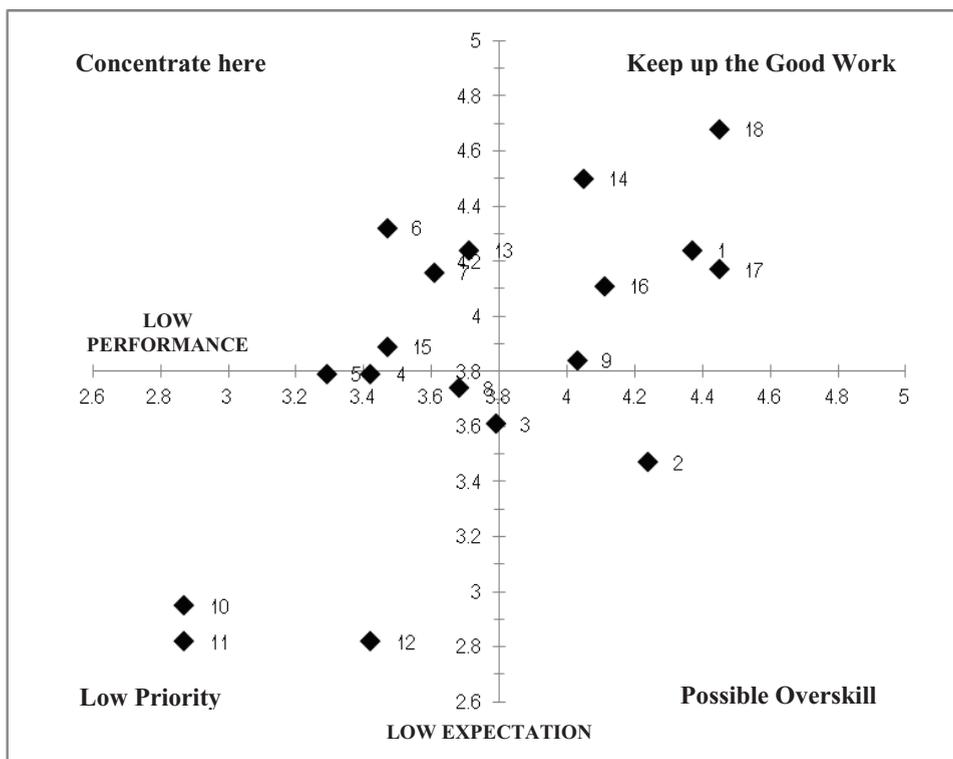


Fig. 1. Expectation-performance matrix.

3.5. Overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions

As shown in Table 4, over half of the respondents (73.7%) were satisfied with the Batu Puteh VT program, suggesting that Batu Puteh Village provided a satisfactory volunteer tourism experience. The volunteers expressed that they can feel the honest and interest of the local community on their daily activities and programs. Majority of the respondents also enjoyed their volunteer tourism experiences with the added opportunities of seeing rare animals such as Orang-utan, Proboscis Monkey, and Pigmy Elephant. Moreover, they also enjoyed staying in the jungle and experience the river cruise. To conclude, the mix of volunteer and travel-related activities heightened the experiences among volunteers. 13.6% of the respondents who were strongly dissatisfied were over 50 years of age

and were particularly dissatisfied with the unplanned volunteer work and language barriers. Volunteers voiced out their frustration with waiting and not being assigned any tasks, which caused them doing nothing for few days. Moreover, volunteers also expressed their distressful feelings regarding their working contributions as there were not seen as being maximized. They were mostly doing repetitive tasks which really lowered down their commitment. In terms of the social aspects, even though volunteers were very happy staying with the locals, they were very unhappy with the ‘visual impression’ only. This happened due to the language barriers. Although many of the respondents had a high satisfaction level with the overall VT experiences, 84.2% of them did not indicate the intention to re-visit Batu Puteh Village for VT. This finding corresponds to Kozak and Rimmington’s (2000) findings that not all satisfied tourists would return as they might look for different destinations, which could provide similar but new experiences (Mautinho, as cited in Blyth, 2008). The results show a positive relationship between volunteers’ overall satisfaction and their intention to recommend, which was also reflected in previous studies (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Baker & Crompton, 2001; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Thus, the results provide good implications to the tourism industry, in which it has to meet or exceed its volunteer tourists’ expectations in order to satisfy them, develop their possible re-visit intention and increase word-of-mouth recommendations.

Table 4. Percentage of overall satisfaction and future behavioral intention.

How much you agree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Overall, I am very satisfied with this volunteer tourism experience.	13.2	7.9	5.3	21.1	52.6
I would volunteer with this organization again.	26.3	57.9	0	7.9	5.3
I would recommend this trip to friends/relatives.	0	13.2	0	26.3	60.5

4. Conclusion

The study reveals the complexity of motivation and satisfaction in VT. VT management needs to develop a solid understanding of the different motivational factors of the different types of volunteer tourists. This can be achieved by 1) learning more about volunteer tourists’ unique motivations as a way to encourage VT participation, and 2) developing a marketing program that appeals to those distinctive motivational factors. The study also recognizes the importance of matching expectations with realities. The absence of a structured volunteer work plan and tasks may lead to dissatisfaction. Thus, it is recommended that VT management develops a clear work plan with specific tasks for volunteer tourists as part of the package they promote and offer and to boost volunteers’ commitment. Additionally, program facilitators may employ specialized staff to assist volunteers at project sites and to plot more proper tasks according to the volunteers’ requirements and abilities. As expected in all research, there are limitations to this study. The main limitation of this study is the sample size, which consisted of only 38 respondents. It is not an encouraging sample size. There is a possibility that such insufficient sample size has affected the reliability of some constructs in the study. Besides, this study focused on the volunteer tourists’ feedback only. Thus, the findings of this study just only showed the expectations and perceptions from one side. Therefore, future research should investigate the expectations and perceptions of the residents of the host communities being visited by volunteer tourists.

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