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# Understanding the Sustainable Development of Tourism

10

## Volunteer Tourism

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

# 10

## Volunteer Tourism

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### Rationale

The aim of this chapter is to provide students with a critical understanding of the phenomenon of volunteer tourism. It will consider how volunteer tourism occurs in diverse community settings with a particular emphasis upon international contexts. It emphasises the potential volunteer tourism has as a transformative form of sustainable tourism that extends beyond the finite limits of a particular volunteering experience. In this chapter, students will develop a foundational understanding of how this transformation is best realised, and ultimately aims to lead both volunteer tourists and host communities toward responsible and continuing participation in local and global development.

This chapter begins by defining volunteer tourism and providing students with an understanding of its development and progression. Particular attention is paid to the way volunteer tourism has been conceptualised as an alternative form of sustainable tourism that is grounded in philanthropic and altruistic ideologies. It also critiques this viewpoint and encourages students to look at volunteer tourism as a reciprocal relationship between host communities and volunteer tourists. This reciprocity is explored by considering the needs of the host community by examining the principles of community planning that underpin quality volunteer tourism projects with particular emphasis upon the strengths and weaknesses of community development processes. The chapter then examines the needs of volunteer tourists, particularly those who are young adults. While volunteer tourism is increasingly being undertaken by a diverse range of individuals, its value as an educational tool for students studying sustainable tourism cannot be overstated. This chapter explores how hands-on volunteer tourism community work allows students to gain invaluable personal and career experience, as well as build powerful life and job skills that can be applied towards future community-building initiatives. This chapter also examines the principles of leadership and group dynamics that underpin successful volunteer tourism ventures.

### Learning outcomes

On completion of this chapter the student should be able to:

- ◆ Articulate what is meant by volunteer tourism and how it relates to sustainable tourism
- ◆ Describe the development of volunteer tourism and the factors that have contributed to its proliferation
- ◆ Describe who the major stakeholders are in volunteer tourism and the roles they contribute, as well as the benefits for each

- ◆ Critically discuss cross-cultural issues and contested meaning within volunteer tourism philosophies and behaviour
- ◆ Critically explain how volunteer tourism relates to the concept of community planning and community development
- ◆ Explain how clear ethical standards, leadership and community involvement are important components of successful volunteer tourism programmes.

## Understanding volunteer tourism

'Volunteer tourists' have been defined by Wearing as tourists 'who, for various reasons, 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' (2001: 1). These holidays appear to be targeted at young adults who find time to give up work and study commitments for an 'experience'. Simpson (2004) equates volunteer tourism to that of volunteering by 'gap year' students in the UK which combine hedonistic tourism with altruistic development work. The activity is becoming even more popular with 275 organisations listed worldwide in the 2003 *Guide to Volunteer Vacations* by Bill McMillon *et al.* (Brown and Lehto, 2005).

## Evolution of volunteer tourism

The intersection between volunteering and tourism falls broadly into two camps. The first is from a supply-side perspective where volunteers provide unpaid labour that supplements and supports the supply of tourism services. Volunteers are the backbone of many community festivals and mega-sporting events that attract thousands of tourists. They are also the unsung heroes behind the scenes supporting tourist attractions such as zoos, museums and heritage sites.

The second intersection, 'volunteer tourism' (also known as 'voluntourism'), is a form of tourism demand and is the focus of this chapter. Volunteer tourists are those individuals who travel to host communities in need, typically in developing countries, to volunteer their vacation time to work on a wide range of humanitarian or environmental restoration projects. Volunteer tourism developed in the 1990s as a way for non-government organisations (NGOs) to supplement their long-term international volunteers with short-term support. However, at the dawn of the 21st century, there has been a rapid rise in commercial tourism operators who specialise in providing a wide range of packaged experiences to those wanting to volunteer but who do not have the time or inclination to seek out volunteering experiences independently.

Volunteer tourism's ascendancy has coincided with the emergence of the 'new tourist' (Poon, 2003) – a more mature tourist who seeks personal development and authentic experiences through travel that are lacking in mass tourism. The new tourist avoids mass tourism and seeks to travel independently to less frequented destinations, or to engage on a deeper level with locals than the superficiality of transactional relations most often encountered in mass tourism (i.e. a tourism encounter with locals may only extend to waiters, tour guides or hotel staff in mass

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