

# Tourism and Demography



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## Gap Year Travel Alternatives

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## Gap Year Travel Alternatives: Generation Y, Volunteer Tourism and Global Citizenship

Kevin D. Lyons and Stephen Wearing

### Objectives

The purpose of this chapter is to:

- ◆ Examine the promulgation of Gen-Y gap year travel by government and the tourism industry as a means to multicultural understanding and global citizenship;
- ◆ Contrast the neoliberal perspectives which pervade gap year travel advocacy and advertising with the stated ideology of cosmopolitanism such travel is meant to engender in the traveller;
- ◆ Examine volunteer tourism as an alternative gap year experience which may be undertaken either in resistance to or hegemony with neoliberal perspectives;
- ◆ Discuss the need for and implications of research into Gen-Y gap year travel.

## Introduction

Accounting for over one-twelfth of world trade and by far the largest movement of people across borders, international travel has been promoted by governments and the tourism industry as an important facilitator of global citizenship. It has been commonplace in the tourism literature to argue that tourism can and does function as an important contributor to the development of the attributes of global citizenship such as international and cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and sharing of values, mutual support, disabusing of stereotypes and exchange of values (Ketabi, 1996). Notwithstanding this global mobility, evidence of global citizenry and the tolerance it promotes is far from ubiquitous.

People born between the early-1980s and the early 2000s are often referred to as members of Generation Y, or Gen-Y (named so for following after Gen-X, people born between the late 1960s to early 1980s). Gen-Yers have been described as being more technologically proficient than their predecessors (having grown up in the age of the Internet, mobile phones and MP3 players), more materially privileged (in Westernised societies) and thought to be more socially aware and tolerant of different cultures (Patterson, 2007). As discussed by Moscardo *et al.* (see Chapter 6), Gen-Y travellers tend to seek authentic, individualised experiences that are an alternative to mass tourism. The rise in volunteer tourism as an alternative gap year experience seems to be one way Gen-Y seeks to fulfil these travel desires. Recently, political and community leaders, along with representatives of the tourism industry have begun promoting the benefits of a gap year as a de facto form of civics education that promulgates an acceptance and tolerance of cultural diversity and engenders the development of global citizenship (cf. Netanyahu, 1998; Georgiou, 2008). International gap year travel has emerged as a significant contemporary form of global youth tourism in recent years. In the UK, the international 'gap travel' sector has grown to become a significant form of outbound tourism (Simpson, 2005) supported by an industry of commercial and NGO provider organisations.

On the surface, volunteer tourism and the intentions of Gen-Y gap year volunteers seem benevolent, altruistic, and therefore a wholly positive and good phenomenon. However, initial research into this burgeoning field suggests this may not be the case, and there is much more occurring than mere good intentions (Simpson, 2004; Callanan and Thomas, 2005).

In this chapter we examine the valorisation of cross-cultural understanding through travel as it manifests in the recent development of gap year tourism programmes and policies for Gen-Y travellers (particularly

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