Voluntourism: A Powerful Trend

Robert HUGHES*

Introduction

Voluntourism, a newly coined term, describes the practice of combining a vacation with volunteering. This is in contrast to what is now being referred to as "arranged volunteering" which is an organized program through a government agency or an NGO for an extended period of time. The period of commitment for "arranged volunteers" is usually months to in some cases a few years. Arranged volunteer programs for overseas programs are usually quite structured and involve extensive preparation such as an orientation, language studies, and technical training.

The overseas volunteer activity of Salamat circle of Toyo University can be classified as voluntourism. University student participants volunteer to participate in two week work camps in the Philippines. These trips have planned weekend or holiday excursions to interesting seaside locations. Participants can enjoy marine sports and beachside activites. Most recently, Salamat members have completed a project that began two years ago to learn construction techniques and build a daycare/livelihood center. The building was financed by Salamat fund-raising efforts.

In the International Herald Tribune, in an article titled "A Season For Asian Travel" Catherine Greenberg, the vice-president of volunteer communications at Globe Aware (a non-profit organization based in Texas), is quoted as saying that those who volunteer gain insight into the important matters of life such as community, compassion, and hard work, as opposed to the pursuit of money or luxury items. These statements it seems are based entirely on her own intuitions and experiences organizing volunteer programs.

Greenberg believes voluntourism is an exciting way to promote active civic engagement in disadvantaged communities. According to her, voluntourists engage in projects that promote cultural awareness and/or sustainability. Cultural awareness is the appreciation of a culture as it exists, without any intention to change it to be more like your own culture.

*Faculty of Regional Development Studies, Toyo University
1. Effect on Volunteers

From this perspective, voluntourism, is much more than a quaint term to describe intrepid do-gooders. Voluntourism is being touted as a powerful catalyst of change for both beneficiaries and participants alike. The effort made by a volunteer or the amount of labor contributed to a project may well be measurable through some form of accountability reporting or evaluation. However, trying to determine the impact on the actual volunteer as a result of the experience is not an easily measurable item.

Alexander (2007) investigating how general vacation travel impacts a tourist, found in a survey of 999 people, that 53% were impacted by a vacation. These were not pocket book impacts as she specifically defined ‘impact’ as a long lasting change in the person’s subsequent behavior. Alexander’s research and previously reported findings on traditional or arranged volunteering (National Centre of Volunteering, 2003) indicate that voluntourism will also have the capacity to change people. In fact, her work indicates that changes in self are more like to occur if travel experience involves personal interaction. She cites Wearing (2001) as having determined that it is interaction within a community or with other volunteers that will act as the catalyst for change within oneself. Alexander’s research utilized a pre/post experience personality inventory for volunteers and a control group who had continued to live their normal existence. Her findings suggest that change among volunteers took place with specific traits such as trust, artistic interest, and assertiveness. Alexander followed up with e-mail interviews with volunteers to try and determine the cause of such change. She has collected many first person accounts of volunteers and their experiences. Alexander believes there is a powerful mechanism for self-growth in voluntourism.

If one looks briefly into the literature existing in the field of positive youth development, one will quickly find frameworks from which to view positive youth development. With socially valued outcomes, much work has already been done determining what strengths and positive qualities should be present in the lives of young people. One conceptualization of positive youth development is called the five C’s. The five C’s includes the following: competence, confidence, connection, character and compassion Lerner, 2003 (p.8). There are other conceptual models but in the most fundamental of ways they are strikingly similar.

Larson (2000) states that ‘initiative’ is the most essential requirement for positive youth development. Initiative is stated as the quality most important for adult functioning in western society. Initiative, according to Larson, is mobilizing your mental powers to pursue a course of action without getting waylaid by obstacles. Activities that would meet the criteria of positive youth development are varied. Within communities, project organizers can look at segments of the community to create partnerships to help develop the framework for healthy development. Change could occur at all
levels, within the participants, in the local community, and eventually in the global community (Clary and Rhodes, 2006). If one adopts the notion that youth are resources to be developed (Roth et al., 1998) then it is clear that to nurture young people, opportunities must arise for youth to learn and to participate actively within communities.

Lerner postulates that when youth are thriving, they are noble and are driven by a moral and civic sense to look beyond their own self-interests to make significant contributions to society. Prepared and productive youth will develop when institutions proactively provide the necessary resources. Development can integrate the five C’s on a life path to make an optimal transition into society. When the individual makes productive contributions to family, community and society, they have completed the 6th C, that of contribution.

2. Community Impact

In the Volun-Tourist Newsletter, Stephen Wearing (2005) contributed an interesting article in which he evaluates the social impact of unrestrained tourism development in communities. Mainstream tourism, he said, often involves unquestioning acceptance of the exploitation of the natural environment and this in turn alienates social groups within the host community. These people are frustrated with the developments and outcomes and remain unsure how to have their concerns addressed.

According to Wearing, the negative impact of tourism development on host communities in the 1980’s led to the development of community-based approaches. Typically when the host community is not involved in the planning until the last stages, such as implementation, the projects fail to meet community needs or values, and they will most likely fail to get local support.

From this industry failing, the concept of voluntourism appears to have emerged. Generally speaking, most travelers engage in selfish behavior. The modern tourist ventures to a destination to get the most in terms of value regarding food and recreation while hopefully exploiting a weak currency. Voluntourism is the movement attempting to move beyond this limited selfish focus. Voluntourism with its focus on community-based projects is the sustainable backlash against the unrestrained growth of commercial tourism.

As advice for any agency or organization intending to offer voluntourism, it is Wearing’s position that three elements need to be considered. The three considerations for any such undertaking are: the underlying values, the developmental goals, and the impact on the host community.

Tourism in host communities basically exploits the local resources to benefit the tourist. In contrast,
voluntourism, as stated by Wearing, offers a resource to a community that has already identified its developmental needs. In consideration of those needs, the voluntourist offers support to the local community.

Wearing states that members of the host community must have input into any such projects as they are the local experts, in contrast to the travel agents who are accustomed to dictating the scope and intensity of any development and who disregard local sentiment. Typically in the past, destination planning was undertaken by private operators completely disinterested in the local vision for the location. Most tourism destinations, according to Wearing, are not created in accordance with community needs or resources. In stark contrast, voluntourism functions as a support for community-based projects and ultimately can play a valuable role in sustainable tourism without the requirement of the full-blown infrastructure of a tourist destination.

Heyniger and Lamoureux (2008) reported that after volunteer or service-oriented activities, travelers experience a strong sense of well-being and a renewed sense of purpose in their lives. They refer to a Travel Industry Association (TIA) survey conducted in 2005 which revealed that 25% of travelers expressed interest in a service-based or volunteer vacation. Travelocity.com reported that the number of vacationers doing volunteer work rose to eleven percent in 2007 from six percent in 2006. This is a significant growth trend in tourism.

3. Implications

Considering all the attention and resources the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is lathering on its most recent project for the Promotion of Global Human Resources, one cannot help but wonder if project organizers have not left out a most critical component in the determination how students can become global human resources. Ultimately one would expect that Japanese students should be prepared to function well in other cultures as a result of experiential learning. This alone entails problem solving capabilities and critical thinking skills regardless of the languages being spoken. It is suggested here that the growth potential and powerful impact of voluntourism on participants is something that cannot be overlooked in the quest to develop Japanese who are competent global human resources.

References
Alexander, Z. (2007). An investigation into the impact of Vacation Travel on the tourist (the self), Unpublished MSc Dissertation, Faculty of Innovation, School of Sport, Leisure and Tourism, Buckinghamshire New University, High Wycombe
Volun-Tourist Newsletter, Vol. 5 Issue 2  http://www.voluntourism.org/

A Season For Asian Travel, (2011). International Herald Tribune, Friday June 17th


National Center of Volunteering (2003). You cannot be serious! Involving volunteers with mental health problems, Government Department of Health


Wearing, S. 2005 Voluntourism and Community Development, Volun-Tourist Newsletter, December
ボランツーリズム

ロバート・ヒューズ

ボランツーリズムは、ボランティアとツーリズムの合成語である。比較的短期間の休暇中に、海外でボランティアをすることが、きわめて有意義な体験となりえることから作られた概念である。この論文では、ボランツーリズムに関しての議論を紹介し、その意義について論じている。

キーワード：ボランティア、ツーリズム、ボランツーリズム。