

# “Volunteer tourism - an ambiguous marketing phenomenon”

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<b>ARTICLE INFO</b>	Konstantinos Tomazos (2010). Volunteer tourism - an ambiguous marketing phenomenon. <i>Innovative Marketing</i> , 6(4)
<b>RELEASED ON</b>	Monday, 27 December 2010
<b>JOURNAL</b>	"Innovative Marketing "
<b>FOUNDER</b>	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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## Volunteer tourism – an ambiguous marketing phenomenon

### Abstract

One of the more recent forms of tourism to emerge from the continuing fragmentation of tourism into many different forms is what has become known as volunteer tourism. Although itself taking on a number of variations, it is essentially the practice of individuals going on a working holiday and volunteering their labor for worthy causes. It is widely accepted that volunteer tourism has mirrored in many ways the development and commercialisation of opportunities for individuals to engage in ecotourism, another form of tourism which also began on a small scale with compassionate and non-economic priorities. This theoretical paper illustrates the ambiguity that characterises the volunteer tourism phenomenon and the challenges that this poses in terms of its marketing.

**Keywords:** volunteer tourism, marketing, leisure.

### Introduction

Volunteer tourism is a form of travel which involves volunteering for a worthy, often charitable cause. Historically, volunteer tourism has its roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a Swiss businessman Pierre Ceresole, horrified by the aftermath of the First World War, established Service Civil International (SCI) as an organisation of volunteers that provided relief to those in need (Tomazos and Butler, 2009). More recently, volunteer tourism found impetus through the influx of the Cold War and the attempts of the Americans to win hearts and minds, and the Soviets to expand the sphere of their influence in the 1960s and 1970s (Tomazos and Butler, 2009), and has grown steadily to experience a boom in the 2000s. Thousands of volunteers now use the services of a large number of different organizations which facilitate volunteering experiences. The volunteers vary in terms of their motivation, their background and their expectations, as do the organizations that facilitate their 'deployment' throughout more than three thousand projects spanning 150 countries. Volunteer tourism endeavours can be either domestic or international. They can also vary in duration, depending on the project and the volunteer organisation involved.

Research had indicated that volunteer tourism organizations put emphasis on meeting the perceived need of destinations and communities by creating social goods for the benefit of groups or individuals (Tomazos, 2009). This need appears to be swelling the ranks of volunteers who are prepared to pay, travel and work in order to serve a cause or provide assistance.

This paper focuses on the ambiguous nature of volunteer tourism and the challenges that arise for the marketing of such opportunities.

### 1. Background to volunteer tourism

Volunteer tourism has become increasingly popular under a variety of names: "volunteer tourism" (Hen-

derson, 1981), "volunteer vacation" (McMillon, Cutchines, and Geissinger, 2006), "mini mission" (Brown and Morrison, 2003), "mission-lite", "pro-poor tourism" (Ashley, Roe and Goodwin, 2001; Hall, 2007), "vacation volunteering", "altruistic tourism" (Singh, 2002), "service based vacation", "participatory environmental research (PERT)" (Ellis, 2003) and "voluntourism" (The Guardian, 2007).

The studies of the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (2008) demonstrate that the volunteer tourism market has grown rapidly, with a current yearly total of 1.6 million volunteer tourists, contributing a value between USD 1.7-2.6 billion. The significant growth and the uniqueness of the volunteer tourism model have attracted many researchers and practitioners.

From the titles listed above, volunteer tourism can be viewed as a tourism activity incorporating volunteer services. As a sector, it combines environmental, cultural and humanitarian issues with an intention to benefit, not only the participants (the tourist element), but also the locals (the volunteer element). It could be said that volunteer tourism meets the needs of tourists who prefer to travel with a purpose (Brown and Lehto, 2005) and to make a difference during their holiday (Coghlan, 2006), thus enjoying a tourist experience while gaining the benefit of contributing to others.

What has captured the interest of a number of researchers, in particular, is the motivation behind the choice of such a type of holiday (McGeehee and Norman, 2002; Ellis, 2003; Lyons, 2003; Broad, 2003; Brown and Lehto, 2005; Campbell and Smith, 2006; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Mustonen, 2007; Broad and Jenkins, 2008; Lepp, 2008; Lyons and Wearing, 2008; McGeehee and Andereck, 2008). Four reasons why people travel with a purpose identified by Brown and Lehto (2005) are: cultural immersion, the desire to give something back (altruism), camaraderie (friendship), and family. The key motives of volunteer tourists emerging from Caissie and Hallpenny's (2003) study about a nature and conservation program included: pleasure seeking, program

“perks”, place and nature based context, leaving a legacy, and altruism. Those researchers found that the participants focused more on self than altruistic reasons and expected their trip not only to fulfil a higher need such as self-actualization, but also the basic needs of relaxation and stimulation (Caissie and Halpenny, 2003). Mustonen (2007) suggested that four similar interactive dimensions, altruism, egoism, socializing and individuality, motivated volunteer tourists, based on his research. Researchers have tended to divide volunteer tourists into volunteer-minded and vacation-minded participants (Wearing, 2001; Brown and Lehto, 2005; Mustonen, 2007), but it can be argued that the true volunteer tourist exists in a continuum dimension somewhere in between these two extremes.

## 2. Method

This paper is a distillation of the Ph.D. authors research carried out between 2006 and 2009. The data on the organizations are derived from a desk analysis of 3,441 volunteer tourism projects in 150 countries (Tomazos and Butler, 2009). The data was subsequently coded and analyzed in order to create a detailed investigation into the supply of volunteer opportunities.

In terms of the findings on the demand side of volunteer tourism, the data was derived as a result of living and working with volunteers in an orphanage in Mexico over the summer of 2007. The author used the method of covert participant observation and the findings of this study have been used to conceptualise the volunteers as modern “heroes” (Tomazos and Butler, 2010).

## 3. Volunteer tourism as a hybrid of work and leisure

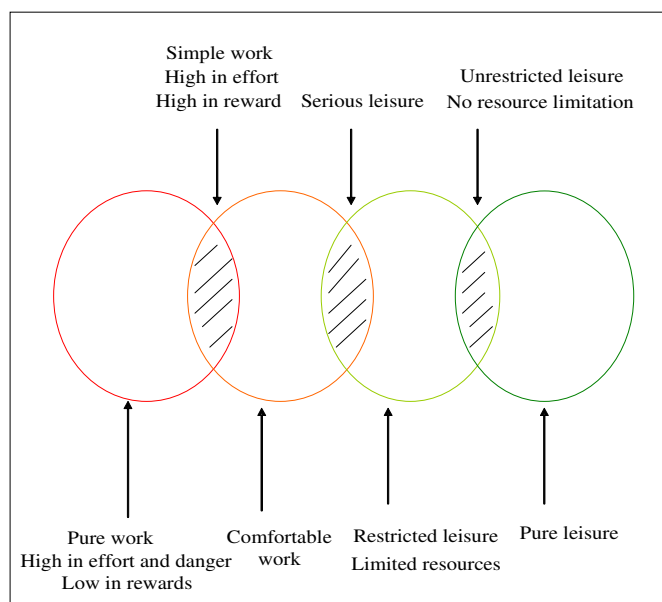
A work-leisure synthesis is required in order to be able to conceptualize volunteer tourism and provide a conceptual ‘hook’ for future research. The fusion between work and leisure means that there are various mixes of work and leisure that may overlap each other.

As presented in Figure 1 the relationship between work and leisure could be presented as a continuum with the one extreme being pure work and the other extreme pure leisure. In order to show the overlapping notions, the Figure 1 was devised from the work of Jackson (1989) and Stebbins (2007). Pure work (Tomazos, 2009) is often strenuous, even dangerous, involving following orders and fulfilling enforced obligation with a low return (low rewards). Pure leisure can be seen as synonymous to Stebbins’ (2007) casual leisure, a type of activity that does not need any preparation or planning and does not take

any significant effort on behalf of the participant to complete (strolling, sun-bathing, etc).

Simple work (Tomazos, 2009) is carrying out strenuous work but with higher rewards. Comfortable work (Jackson, 1989) is work that is enjoyable and under other circumstances could have been a leisure activity. Instead a certain level of talent means that the individual can make a living out of taking part in a (for others, not so talented) leisure activity. Serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) indicates an activity which takes a lot of effort on behalf of the individual and discipline, just like work, but the difference is lack of remuneration. Career (long term) volunteering is a part of this category. The next circle is restricted leisure. This category includes leisure activities like DIY (Do it yourself) around the house or working on a car during free time. It is termed restricted leisure because the individual, by doing the DIY, in general avoids the cost of paying a professional to carry out the same work. The restriction applies to the financial resources of individuals in general that may be trying to reduce their spending by not hiring a professional. The final category is unrestricted leisure, where the individual takes part in similar tasks to the ones above, but the avoidance of payment is not a factor.

Volunteer tourism can be argued to belong in both restricted and unrestricted leisure. It can be seen as restricted because in the case of very cheap volunteer tourism opportunities, the individual has to work during free time but in exchange they avoid the extra cost of a different type of holiday to the same destination, just as the amateur plumber, painter or gardener avoids the cost of paying a professional. The restriction in this case is the potential lack of resources which may push individuals towards not hiring a professional or using the same analogy, not choosing a more expensive holiday. There might be cases, where resources are not an issue and the DIY participant chooses not to call in a professional, for reasons other than necessity. Similarly, a volunteer tourist may choose a certain volunteer holiday for reasons other than low price. It can also be categorised as unrestricted leisure when volunteer tourism holidays incur a similar or even a higher cost than a conventional type of holiday to the same destination. In this case, there are no financial or resource restrictions and the choice is determined by other factors. Finally, volunteer tourism could also feature as serious leisure, provided that the conditions of frequent undertaking and skills acquisition are fulfilled.



Source: Devised from Jackson (1989) and Stebbins (2007).

**Fig. 1. The work and leisure fusion**

#### 4. Volunteer tourism as a hybrid of altruism and profit

Altruism is a very complicated aspect of human behavior. It may stem from the early days of humans on earth and their quest for survival in a wild and unforgiving environment. Even though, it could be conceded that as a concept, altruism goes against one of the most basic instincts of man, self-preservation. Nevertheless, altruism has evolved as society, has changed in order to serve its purpose, promoting the importance of the whole over the individual, a notion that has been reinforced by religious and moral codes. This was made possible by the need of humans to be accepted and altruistic behavior was an example, set by local heroes (Tomazos and Butler, 2010) or characters in religious scripts. This idealistic behavior then was used by parents who tried to bestow this model behavior on their children. This simple process reflected the norms and mores of societies at a time when information was a rare and exclusive commodity, and education was a privilege of the few, and survival in a hostile environment depended heavily on community self-support.

Admittedly none of the sciences examined clearly have the answer in terms of human behavior or altruism. Further, evidence is the fact that recently a new paradigm has been adopted by researchers, combining genetics, medicine and psychology in order to investigate human behavior more rigorously (Cambridge University News, 2008). Thus, the scientific community is conceding that to date there is neither a definitive nor satisfactory answer to the debate on altruism and human behavior.

Examining the roots of organized volunteer tourism, highlights the role that individual initiative and busi-

ness acumen has played in its development and contemporary forms. A business model which accesses time, labor and funds in addition to offering the validation that the business contributes to a good cause is likely to be considered appealing from an entrepreneurial perspective, especially when aligned with potential for scalability and high growth.

It is clear that the mass-tourism model of packaging and segmentation is now used in volunteer tourism (Ellis, 2003). Through purposefully designed marketing volunteer organisations ensure that volunteers are portrayed as the archetype of a new kind of tourist who has compassion and empathy for the plight of the disadvantaged, the neglected, the endangered and the needy, irrespective of species, situation or destination. This approach has proven very successful.

While a significant segment of the volunteer organizations label themselves as non-profit, the market is becoming more and more prolific with many organizations diversifying and offering various extras as part of the volunteering experience. Recently, there have been media calls for the volunteer organizations to stop charging large amounts of money for their services based on the argument, where there is a need volunteering it should be free of charge (The Times, 2008).

It is difficult to determine to what degree the marketing of volunteer tourism is influencing the selection process of participants and to what extent volunteer tourism organizations are creating or shaping demand. In earlier years key organizations (e.g., SCI and the Red Cross) were influential because they were the only way to access volunteer opportunities. Now many organizations can offer much more than a simple opportunity to volunteer, they can and do offer holidays. It is

open to question whether the balance is shifting from an altruistic philosophy and commitment to a more hedonistic and profit-oriented business model.

In terms of their business model, several organizations operate commercially with their bottom line in mind, since they have certain costs to meet, such as overheads and staff salaries (Tomazos and Butler, 2009). In terms of price, organizations vary from charging a small one-off registration fee to offering a variety of different options to supplement the volunteer tourism experience. Several organizations claim to make direct contributions to some projects in the form of money or equipment. However, it is very difficult to establish the validity of such claims.

The motivations or expectations of the organizations involved can be put on a continuum, between making a profit and serving a cause. Despite their motivations or expectations, it must be accepted that volunteer tourism organizations facilitate and contribute to the development of volunteer tourism through providing assistance to many projects. The cathartic aspect of volunteer tourism is evident in relation to individual volunteers, but it would require further research to establish the extent to which this may be so for volunteer tourism organizations.

However, the contemporary model of volunteer tourism is a far cry from the ideals of pacifism and selfless contribution that became the force behind early international volunteering efforts (Tomazos and Butler, 2009). Market forces, diversification and the interplay between supply and demand have shaped volunteer tourism into another holiday market with the balance shifting from assistance to profit.

It is abundantly clear that there is an ongoing need for projects of the type staffed by volunteer tourists. It is also clear that there is a need to clarify the parameters within which such projects operate and the extent to which value is truly added for the communities in need. The issues raised in this paper must be addressed in greater depth if we are to ensure clarity and sustainability for volunteer tourism which will truly benefit all concerned. There is also a real danger that if this issue is not robustly addressed the lines may become irretrievably blurred between private enterprise and the core values of volunteering in order to help others (Tomazos, 2009). There is a need for further research in order to establish whether there is a shift from altruistic to hedonistic philosophies and the extent to which the profit motive is influencing the movement.

## 5. An overview of the market

Already published research by the author of 2,446 volunteer tourism projects worldwide revealed a growing proliferation in the volunteer tourism market which were then categorised into nine activity groups (Tomazos and Butler, 2009).

This subset of projects involved a total of 146 volunteer tourism organizations. Of the 146 volunteer tourism organizations, the top 40 were selected in terms of international expansion (minimum of ten beyond the original country for this research).

Based on the assumption that the identified projects were fuelled by local need, the 150 destination countries concerned were examined in terms of level of human development which was identified, using their Human Development Index (HDI) score. HDI scores are compiled using factors like GDP (gross domestic product) per capita, life expectancy, the quality of education and the literacy rate, to create a value, where 1.0 is the highest possible score. Countries with an index above 0.8 are called 'high human development' countries; countries with indices between 0.799 and 0.5 are considered medium, while countries below 0.5 are categorized as low human development countries. The results of this analysis were considered relative to population size, in order to clarify whether population might be an influential variable.

In order to get a clearer picture in the value of the projects, in terms of output and added skills to the communities and causes they claimed to support, the top 40 volunteer tourism organizations were selected and an examination of their websites was conducted in order to clarify their claimed status, stated policies and espoused practices. A coding system was developed to enable comparison across the organizations. The 40 organizations selected were examined in relation to key areas of interest based on the International Volunteer Programme Association (IVPA) criteria of ethical practice. The areas of interest for this research were: declared status, pricing policy, diversification (extras), screening of volunteers and involvement of locals (employment).

Examining the roots of organized volunteer tourism makes it impossible to overlook the role that individual initiative and business acumen has played in the development of structures and contemporary forms. Its transformation into a bone fide business was probably inevitable due to the potential appeal of volunteer tourism products. The prospect of creating a business model or structure, which could demand customers' time as well as physical labour along with their funds and provide them with a feeling of satisfaction and validation that they had contributed to a good cause, could be argued to have proven irresistible for aspiring entrepreneurs (Tomazos, 2009). It could be argued that the mass-tourism model of packaging and segmentation, now used in volunteer tourism, was adopted because of its current success and popularity. Volunteer tourism has been segmented and packaged into its contemporary form (Ellis, 2003). Through purposefully designed websites volunteer

organizations ensure that volunteers are portrayed as the archetype of a new kind of tourist who has compassion and empathy for the plight of the disadvantaged, the neglected, the endangered and the needy, irrespective of species, situation or destination, an approach that has proven very successful.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that two of the main themes in relation to volunteer tourism are ambiguity and confusion. Volunteer tourism, as neither solely volunteering nor tourism, stands as a fusion of the two, with the added complexity of the shifting relationship between work and leisure. The predominant model of volunteer tourism expansion also raises questions about the vague relationship between doing good and profiteering. Thus, volunteer tourism, being a vague concept by itself, is also subject to several factors which themselves are characterised by ambiguity. This understanding poses several challenges for the marketing of

volunteer tourism opportunities. Firstly, it becomes clear that stake-holders in volunteer tourism share a symbiotic relationship, with the balance of power at the moment lying with the organizations. At the same time, the participants offer their time, effort and money for a premium price which is set by the organizations. The projects and their operators need to gather information and evaluate their options before getting involved with organizations in order to maximise their potential benefits. The ongoing expansion of the volunteer tourism market will provide projects with a greater variety of organizations to choose from and the opportunity to become 'choosers' instead of 'beggars'. But still which is the most effective way to market the opportunity to pay in order to work; and how do participants make their consumer choices in a market that is characterised by ambiguity? It is clear that more research is needed in order to entangle the riddle wrapped in an enigma that is volunteer tourism.

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