Volunteer Tourism: Questions and Critiques

Good to know info:

Definitions

Voluntourism

What is voluntourism?

"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."

-Wearing 2001

Volunteer tourism initially came from missions and faith based volunteering. In the last 40 years, secular volunteer tourism has grown continuously as a market in the form of gap years, alternative spring breaks, and simply because people want to engage with a community in their travels. Volunteers range in ages, needs for luxury, time dedicated to the project, country of origin, destination country, and in pretty much every other way. Almost always the volunteers come from countries in the global north and have more education and are firmly within the bounds of an upper middle class.

Sustainability

What is sustainable tourism? "envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such

way that economic, social and aesthetic need can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems". UNWTO 2011

What sustainable development mean in the context of volunteer tourism?

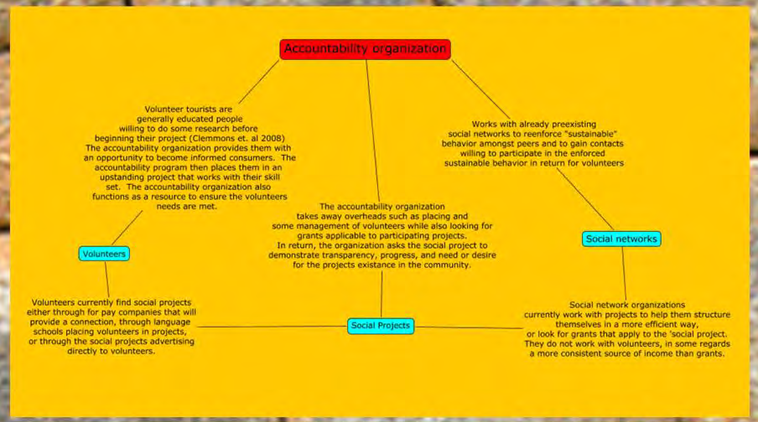
- Voluntourism projects must be developed with the local communities' needs, and not the travelers' or the company's needs, as the first priority.
- Create opportunities for lasting impact, and not quick change, that are sustainable.
- Conduct a thorough analysis of various alternatives, and develop voluntourism programs only if voluntourism is determined as a suitable option

Background: The notion of the tourist has evolved and fluctuated along with the evolutions of culture people have experienced from the first mecca to the now requisite American family trip to Disney Land. As tourism has evolved from a religious experience to a luxury experience, none of the iterations of tourism have been lost along the way. With the breadth of tourism experiences available along with the motivations for travel, new aspects of culture and society are represented.

Tourism is one of the highest grossing industries in the world. By many investigations, it is claimed to be the second largest world industry (UNWTO). As more consumers seek unique vacation experiences, the options available to tourists expands. New cultures become part of the world tourism market, and face the issues brought by the presence of tourism. Volunteer tourism is one of these new growth areas of tourism. In examining how some of the issues inherently associated with tourism also apply to volunteer tourism, I will be also examining potential solutions. Travel to work for free in a different location is not a new notion onto itself as faith based missions have existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The secularization and for-profit sectors of volunteer tourism are new, and represent a value change in those who participate. There is some reason why all of a sudden thousands of people around the world decided that the best way to spend their free time and money working in a community that is not even their own.

My volunteer tourism research is situated in Cusco, Peru. One of the most popular tourist destinations in South America due to both its closeness to Machu Picchu, as well as its own history as the capitol of the Incan Empire. With 2 million tourists annually passing through Cusco, it definitely faces some of the challenges of a tourism based economy.

Purpose: With the presence of an accountability organization, volunteer tourism can focus on local problems instead of concentrating on the international volunteers to promote culturally acceptable, ecologically sensitive, financially stable development projects in Cusco, Peru.



The major actors and relationships in the volunteer tourism industry in Cusco.

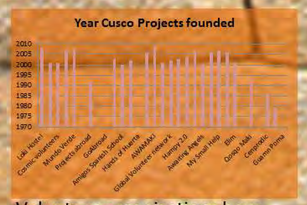
Methodology

Method 1: Academic and popular literature review to understand current opinions of volunteer tourism and sustainable development.

Method 2:Lived in Cusco for six months and interviewed volunteers in Cusco to understand what success in their experience means to them. Survey volunteers to better understand their preferences and demographics. (See results in Table 2)

Method 3: Code the pictures the volunteers take of their experience as well as the photos the organizations use to advertise the project.

Method 4: Interview organizations in Cusco accepting volunteers to understand the problems they associate with the voluntourism industry. (See Results in Table 1)



Volunteer organizations have generally started in Cusco since 2000 when Cusco became a safe and growing tourism destination

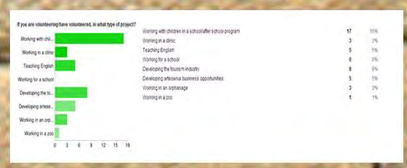


Table 1

Problems found in interviews with project leaders on the volunteer tourism industry	Solutions the accountability org can provide
Corruption	Demand transparency
Lack of communication amongst projects	Use mandatory classes as means to reinforce community amongst social projects
Inconsistent sources of funding	Funnel volunteers, and their resources to good projects
Not planning ahead	Provide classes and set due dates on creating five year plans
Reliance on impassioned leader	Provide classes on how to plan for an exchange of leadership
Volunteers end up going to corrupt organizations or organizations not set up for volunteers	Use volunteers to research success of projects. Maintain contact with projects year round in order to send more volunteers when more are needed for a particular project.

Table 2

Problems found in interviews with volunteers	Solutions the accountability org can provide
Not enough information before arriving	Plenty of information about the local region as well as the project from the perspective of volunteers
Difficulty in knowing whether project was good	Provide information regarding what questions to ask, what signs to avoid, as well as the processes by which the accountability org. decides to support certain projects.
Not enough support from project managers	Provide informational and emotional support to the volunteer as well as a source who will work as a long term go between
Not sure what to do with themselves a lot of the time	The organization will make sure to plan an accomplishable project for the volunteer and ensure resources are available to complete the project.
Feeling overworked and not having enough free time, or feeling underworked and like they are not really helping.	Before permitting projects to join the accountability organization, the projects will be evaluated on whether or not volunteers could be useful to the projects.

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Main Resources used:

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