

Volunteer Tourism: Sustainable Innovation in Tourism, or just “Pettin’ the Critters”?

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Introduction

This is a study of the relationships between two volunteer tourism host communities and the volunteer tourists who visit them. One is a declining rural community located in the Appalachian mountains of the United States. The other is in a rapidly expanding urban setting in Baja California, Mexico. Both are suffering from a lack of affordable health care, with minimal access to quality public education and healthy food and drinking water. Both are experiencing the benefits and the challenges of receiving volunteer tourists. This is an attempt to illuminate the perspective of the residents of these communities and to recognize the complexity of the relationships between and among volunteer tourists and the voluntoured.

A steadily growing body of work exists in the area of volunteer tourism. McGehee and Santos (2005:760) define volunteer tourism as “utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need.”

Most of the research in this area has concentrated on the volunteer tourist (Brown and Morrison, 2003; McGehee and Santos, 2005; McGehee, 2002; McGehee and Norman, 2002; Mustonen, 2005; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2000; 2001; 2002; 2004; Wearing and Deane, 2003), as opposed to people in the local community who host the volunteers. For the most part, the research to date has been primarily descriptive and uncritically posits volunteer tourism as a positive and often environmentally sustainable alternative to mass tourism. However, very little, if any, research exists that questions or explores the socio-cultural sustainability of volunteer tourism. The purpose of this study is to illuminate some of the complex issues that exist in the relationship between volunteer tourists and the voluntoured.

Methodological Approach

As recommended by Beeton (2005) a mixed method approach was utilized for this case study. Both in-depth and informal interviews were conducted with volunteer tourism organization administrators, full-time volunteer interns, local residents, and volunteer tourists in the two communities. Survey research was conducted with residents in Tijuana. Websites operated by numerous volunteer tourism organizations that target McDowell County and Tijuana Mexico were

content analyzed. Finally, overt participant observation was also implemented intermittently over a one year period and is ongoing. For the purposes of this presentation, the author has focused on two emergent themes: the issues related to dependency and the role of organized religion.

“Pettin’ the Critters”: Dependency, Othering, and Coping Strategies of the Voluntoured

During interviews at the offices of the McDowell County Mission, Norma McKinney, Director of Development, told a story that illustrated a major issue within volunteer tourism and a potential drawback to its use as a sustainable form of tourism: dependency (N. McKinney, Welch, WV, 2006, personal communication). She recalled a phone call she had recently received. An organization was interested in bringing a truckload of used clothing to the mission so that they could distribute it directly to local families. She politely thanked them for their interest, then explained that the mission did not support any kind of free hand-outs of items. She offered to take the clothing then sell it at a very inexpensive price at their local thrift store; this way it would preserve the dignity of local residents and reduce dependency on outside sources. The response from the organizer on the other end was adamant: they wanted to set up a table with the truck and “personally hand the clothing to the needy folks.” At that point, Norma explained to me, she knew the phone call was yet another from people who wanted to, in her classic use of the local vernacular, “Pet the Critters.” Cases abound of organizations that may have the best of intentions but a total lack of understanding of how their actions affect the dignity of local residents, both in McDowell County, WV, Tijuana, Mexico, and countless other volunteer tourism destinations throughout the world. This is a classic example where cultural and geographic distance and difference create an atmosphere ripe for the “othering” of the voluntoured by the volunteer tourists. Obviously, Norma McKinney at the McDowell Mission as well as others in the community have developed coping strategies to deal with such othering. Simply by inventing a term for it, e.g. “Pettin’ the Critters”, they had defined and exposed these kinds of volunteer tourist activities from their perspective (Sweet 1989). However, merely identifying and coping with the phenomenon does not reduce or remove its potential detrimental (and decidedly unsustainable) effect on the community.

The dependency issue is also addressed by Los Niños and Esperanza (E. Sabatini, San Diego, CA, 2006, personal communication), two volunteer tourism groups located in Tijuana. They have developed and stressed specific policies to their volunteers, including a “no hand-outs” rule. However, in an example of the complexity of the relationship between volunteer tourists and the voluntoured, this rule is often circumvented. The researcher witnessed one of these “subversive exchanges” with an organization that will remain nameless (to protect the participants), and it was

a joyous and equitable experience, not unlike personal experiences exchanging clothing with other female friends and relatives, or handing down children's gently used clothes to friends who have younger children. Because of the personal relationships established between volunteer and the voluntoured, the sense of "othering" did not exist.

The "R Word": Organized Religion and Volunteer Tourism

The relationship between the voluntoured and volunteer tourists is complex when it comes to the subject of religion. Sometimes the relationship appears to be contradictory, as with the case of the two communities of McDowell County and Tijuana. Census statistics report low church attendance or association with organized religion in McDowell County (quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states 2002), but interviews with residents reveal support for and a high rate of trust in the church-based volunteers who work through local religious-based organizations like the McDowell Mission. Conversely, in a study conducted in Tijuana, a culture known for high rates of church attendance and affiliation, respondents were asked to rank their preferences for the type of volunteers they would like to see in their community. While it is important to note that all categories were ranked favorably, "Faith-based organizations" were ranked last, after college students, corporate teams, fellow Mexicans, and senior citizens (McGehee and Andereck, 2006 unpublished results). Interestingly, the lack of enthusiasm for volunteer tourists associated with organized religion does not spill over to many of the volunteer organizations that are well-established within the communities but lack a prosthetizing component.

The Future of Volunteer Tourism

As indicated previously, this is a case study of two communities heavily involved with volunteer tourism. Perhaps the most telling testimonial to the complexity of the relationship may be exemplified through the countless conversations with people who were heavily involved in volunteer tourism. Invariably, the conversation would boil down to one basic (and some would argue decidedly un-academic) question: "Is volunteer tourism a good thing?" As expected, the answer was never simple. The commonality that existed was the deep struggle each person had with the question. Jay Wilson, Executive Director of McDowell Mission, exemplified the thoughts of many when he shared that he had been wrestling with the question for two years. "Volunteers have been coming to this part of the country for thirty years, I have been here for six years, and while I am sure that the volunteers reap benefits from the experience, I honestly don't see a change in the community" (J.Wilson, Welch, WV, 2007, personal communication).

But this is not to say that organizers wanted to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. For example, Randy Wallace of Mustard Seeds and Mountains had very concrete ideas about improving volunteer tourism in McDowell County (R. Wallace, Princeton, WV, 2006, personal communication). As with many who support the concepts of sustainable tourism, he argues for a “less is more” approach to volunteer tourism, 1) reducing the number of volunteer tourists and 2) being more selective in terms of matching the skill set each possesses with the particular needs of the community. A recurring theme that emerged among the volunteer tourism administrators interviewed was an interest in furthering development of regulation of volunteer tourism in a way that would 1) track patterns of volunteer tourism to the community 2) exercise some control over who comes, how many come, and the type of activities in which they engage, and 3) better match the skills and interests of volunteer tourists with the needs of the community, or even more particularly, various neighborhoods within the community.

Finally, it was not the intention or presumption of this chapter to attempt to solve the debate over the role of religion in volunteer tourism, but merely to introduce it as an often over-looked issue. There is an undeniable logic that any organized religious doctrine that calls for environmental stewardship, social justice, or caring for fellow human beings may inevitably turn to volunteer tourism as a possible way to support their doctrine on a global scale. The question that must be explored is “How?” How should the phenomenon of volunteer tourism proceed and develop in a way that, just as with sustainable mainstream tourism, maximizes the positive impacts while minimizing the negative impacts? As indicated previously, of course not all volunteer tourism has a relationship with organized religion. But to best answer this question, the role of organized religion must be considered.

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