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Voluntourism - Pros, Cons, and Possibilities

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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In a 2005 Hot Topic, I briefly mentioned the growing trend of volunteer vacations or “voluntouring.” In the last month or so, media attention to this idea has heated up considerably. I’ve seen short feature stories on the ABC Evening News and Fox News, as well as articles in places as diverse as *The New York Times* and British Airways *High Life Magazine*. One of the organizations promoting “vacations in service,” GlobeAware, provides a list of media mentions of the concept at <http://www.globeaware.org>. Steve McCurley has also noticed this burst of attention, since he selected volunteer vacations as his topic for the current “Along the Web” feature of *e-Volunteerism*

All of this is especially interesting to me because thirty years ago I drove several travel agents (remember those?) nuts trying to uncover something useful I could do for one to two weeks on a vacation, other than help with a scientific expedition. We never found anything although I now know we might have discovered some of the early “work camps” still operating from the 1950s. But last week when I saw British Airways offering a package deal to its customers to fly them to an exotic location and connect them to a volunteering project, I realized the concept had come of age.

What Is Voluntourism?

As the word implies, voluntourism combines vacation travel with volunteering at the destination visited. Search the Web and you’ll find dozens of organizations – both nonprofits and travel businesses – deeply involved in organizing volunteering vacations. It’s also spawned a new vocabulary: *voluntourist*, *ethical holidays*, *travel philanthropy*, and more. Voluntourism is aligned with the more established concept of “sustainable tourism,” defined by Sustainable Travel International as “lessening the toll that travel and tourism takes on the environment and local cultures.” Their motto is: *Leave the world a better place*™ (www.sustainabletravelinternational.org/).

The best site to learn about voluntourism is VolunTourism International (www.voluntourism.org), which provides a wealth of articles about the concept, offers a free VolunTourist e-newsletter, and sponsors an annual Global VolunTourism Forum in Washington, DC. Their special twist is to mobilize the travel industry (tour operators, travel planners, and convention bureaus) to partner with

nonprofits and service-learning programs. VolunTourism's commercial site (www.volunteertourism.com) explains:

VolunTours™ is more than just volunteering. VolunTours™ is a new way to travel. It is a revolutionary form of interacting with your destination and your destination interacting with you. VolunTours™ is the next step in the development of unique meetings & conventions' experiences.

Two examples of sites that connect people with voluntourist opportunities are:

- Go Differently - <http://www.godifferently.com/voluntourism.html>
- North by North East Tours - www.north-by-north-east.com

What's Good about Voluntourism?

When it's well-organized and thoughtfully planned, the traveler can indeed use vacation time to great advantage, helping the host country and gaining many personal benefits. Some of the most obvious pluses are:

- It meets the needs of busy people who want to volunteer *and* travel – with special benefits to families seeking a memorable shared experience and to the many adult singles (of all ages) who prefer taking vacation time in the company of others. Given the research about Baby Boomers, it seems evident that voluntourism will be very popular with them for many years to come.
- Well-managed spurts of volunteer help can be extremely productive for many types of projects that need a lot of willing hands. After a natural disaster, for example, the enormous clean-up and rebuilding work goes on for years, and a continuous stream of fresh recruits can keep the momentum going.
- Ideally, voluntourism is a people-to-people experience, in which both the helper and the helped become acquainted with one another. Just as Peace Corps or UN Volunteers strives to create cultural exchange and understanding, even brief periods of working together gives everyone involved insight into the world of the “other.”
- Positive experiences as a voluntourist can lead to more sustained service, either in return trips to the same country or to more informed and deliberate forms of volunteering back home for international or development causes.

Are There Problems with Voluntourism?

Note that above I said “when it's well-organized and thoughtfully planned....” If the voluntourism organizers don't truly understand the complexity of making this sort of experience successful for everyone, it can be more harmful than good. A few issues are:

- How are the volunteering opportunities chosen? Are these real needs and can volunteers truly do something useful in as little as a week?
- Is there an application process or qualifications for volunteers or does the receiving site have to take anyone and everyone who wants to come?
- What's the ratio of service to sightseeing? Voluntourists do not have to martyr themselves and can opt to play as hard as they work, but service projects that are so slim they only give a respectable veneer to an otherwise leisure tour hurt the entire idea. Urban Dictionary, after remarking that a volunteer vacation "looks good on one's CV as a gap year activity," adds this fictional – but telling – conversation (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Voluntourism>):

Voluntourist 1: Shall we go to Khao Lak to engage in a spot of voluntourism?

Voluntourist 2: No, tsunami voluntourism is old hat now. All the bars are closed and hardly anyone is living in the houses built, anyway.

Voluntourist 1: Good point. (pauses) Sierra Leone?

Voluntourist 2: Are you insane?

- Does the project provide orientation and training to both the foreign volunteers and the local recipients of the service to make sure both sides are fully prepared to get the most from the experience?
- Who's on site to troubleshoot possible problems?
- What exactly is the risk management process here? Are both sides protected from willfully bad conduct? How?
- What happens to the local project over time if some other destination becomes more popular? In other words, is there any commitment by the tour organizers to complete work started?

In general, the biggest gripe about volunteer vacations is that they simply expand the trend of episodic volunteering, in which feel-good bursts of service give the volunteer pleasure but do not result in much useful help for the recipients or the complex cause. It is also often noted that problems away from home can be more appealing to support than those close to home.

What Does this Trend Mean to Traditional Volunteering?

It strikes me as fascinating that at the same time we in the developed world have evolved frantic risk management policies and procedures, particularly the requirement of all sorts of police and other background checks, it has been possible at the same time to create more and more off-shore

volunteering opportunities, seemingly without any screening demands at all. Is this a function of paternalism, in which under-developed countries are thought to be so needy they shouldn't worry about formalities? Is it simply an overlooked loophole?

When important projects with few resources can welcome willing volunteers from far away, the risks may be worth it to both sides. Can this teach us all something about *balance*? Might we be able to apply this calmer attitude towards risk back home?

At the moment, the vast majority of volunteer vacation projects send people from North America and Europe to developing countries in Africa, South America, and Asia. This is largely because it requires money, time, and access to travel abroad and those three resources are available mainly in the First World. But perhaps someday the concept can be practiced in both directions. Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that engaged people from around the world. For Americans, it may be sobering but also illuminating to recognize that we might be recipients of the help of others, too.

More important, are there some organizations that can develop domestic volunteer vacations? Think about these possibilities:

- Are you located near a popular tourist destination? Why not approach some travel organizers about offering a play/service package during which voluntourists participate in your project for a few days or weeks?
- Do you serve people who come from the countries some volunteer vacations help? Might you connect with the voluntourism groups to offer post-vacation domestic opportunities to continue helping these people throughout the year?
- Can you partner with an overseas organization to do travel exchanges, in which individuals or groups alternate volunteer vacations in both locations, allowing for more ongoing service projects that need attention over a longer time?

What do you think about voluntourism?

Are there ways we can make it work to our advantage?

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Submitted on 15 July 2008 by R. Hart

There are many good and worthy volunteer organizations doing community work abroad, but DO NOT BE NAIVE. Before you sign on (and/or get on the plane!), check out the background of the organization seeking your labor. For instance, some English language programs are fronts for or directly linked to the CIA (volunteers unwittingly provide valuable information about activities and 'major players' in communities where they work), especially in the poorest nations and/or those with very repressive governments.

Also, it is better to work with an organization that takes its leadership and direction from the grassroots/the communities directly affected, instead of going in with their own ideas about what is needed.

Do your homework and don't be afraid to ask the important questions. Don't ever have to say, "I didn't know."

Submitted on 14 December 2007 by Jeremy Stafford, Co-owner, Voluntours, Midrand, Gauteng South Africa

Voluntourism is the fastest growing tourism market globally as well as in South Africa. Unfortunately some organisations exploit the very communities they are supposed to serve and over-promise to their volunteers. We at Voluntours launched our "Code of Good Practice: Volunteering in South Africa" at WTM in London on 14 November 2007 in conjunction with World Responsible Travel Day as a response to these concerns. We use a project-based approach to match our volunteers' skills to community needs. Applicants are not automatically guaranteed a placement on the project. See our website <http://www.voluntoursouthafrica.com/> for our Code of Good Practice.

Submitted on 14 December 2007 by Joyce Major, Seattle, Washington, USA

I teach classes here in Seattle on Inexpensive Volunteer Travel and find there are many low cost choices from wildlife to conservation from orphanages to well, almost anything. I took a year and volunteered around the world. I provide more information on my site: www.smilingattheworld.com

Submitted on 13 October 2007 by Maureen Wright-Evans, CEO, Summer Isle Travel, Kingston, Jamaica W. I.

Jamaica is an exotic island known for sand and sea but it is an ideal country for volunteer holidays as we have 'deep pockets' of poverty. I have always had deep compassion for the poor, so recently I came up with the idea of volunteering and having a holiday. My most surprising moment was going on the internet and finding lots of volunteer holidays. I have developed packages for this travel and want to promote them so people will know of this opportunity in Jamaica. info@summerisle.com.jm

Submitted on 5 April 2007 by Jayne Cravens, United Nations, Kabul, Afghanistan

This topic comes up frequently on the Thorn Tree, the message board for Lonely Planet Readers, as well as places like www.omidiyar.net. You might want to visit and see what people are saying, for further insights on this subject. Most of the contributors have no idea of how expensive these programs are and, therefore, complain constantly at the fees.

Submitted on 15 February 2007 by David Warshaw, Principal, Vistas Volunteer Management Systems, Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey, USA

Re Voluntourism... Those looking for well-planned and meaningful vacation service opportunities can also look to Elderhostel (renamed to Road Scholar, <http://www.roadscholar.org/>, 2014), primarily for people over 55. Look at their list of opportunities under "Service Learning" and you will see about 50

trips that include volunteer activity...from coral reef research in Belize to teaching English in rural Hungary.

***Submitted on 13 February 2007 by H. Roberts, President, PLNJ Inc.,
Keyport, New Jersey USA***

Voluntourism offers the individual a working vacation against the backdrop of globally rich landscapes. But, "work" is the operative word. Organizations that attract, train and provide continuing communication to volunteers benefit most. Organizations with any reluctance to establish a voluntour program should approach charities familiar with project development and adapt accordingly. Volunteers hesitant to investigate voluntour opportunity may find group outings an inspiring place to begin. Sign up prepared!

This growing area of volunteerism most definitely needs further definition for VRM's, organizations and the tourism industry to be fully successful and working together mission focused.

The GREAT news is that global volunteerism has a place in every society and makes the world we live in a very approachable, educating place!

***Submitted on 9 February 2007 by Mary Jo Richardson, Consultant, Education Services, Shoreview,
Minnesota, USA***

The nonprofit organization, Global Volunteers, which headquarters in Minnesota, has been training and sending volunteers to more than twenty countries for 25 years. What I really liked about the experience was the fact that we only serve in areas where the people, who live in the countries where we serve, decide what needs to be done and work along side of us. The training is well done and the experience is a win-win situation. I would encourage anyone interested to contact Global Volunteers and sign up for a wonderful voluntourism experience.

***Submitted on 8 February 2007 by Pierre van den Berg, ex-Cape Nature Conservation, South Africa,
Heidelberg (W.Cape Province), South Africa***

Great initiative. I started a volunteer program, mainly for USA wilderness rangers to work in South Africa since 2003. The program is very similar to what you are describing. But I need support, marketing, funding, etc. to take it further. My wish is that the program can partner with some big association/institution/agency and that it can be developed into an international partnership and exchange program for workers, students, and wilderness supporters.

***Submitted on 6 February 2007 by Scott Lundell, Assistant Director, Information and Volunteer Centre for
Strathcona County, Sherwood Park, Alberta Canada***

This has always struck me as being very similar to mission work. Although there are obvious differences, there are some very strong parallels. And that's been happening for years! Maybe this is just a modern incarnation.

Submitted on 5 February 2007 by Geoff Brown, Recreation Services, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Community Partnership Coordinator, Tallahassee, FL

Two summers ago my wife's family organized a trip to Hawaii where we were to celebrate her parent's 50th year anniversary. I searched the web and lined up several volunteer activities that we could adopt as a family project...litter pick up/ invasive non-native pest-plant removal... unfortunately none of my in-laws were into it! They just wanted a vacation! After reading this article, perhaps I should set up some activities here in Florida to recruit the breed of folks ('travelers') who want a 'connection.' They may be interested to find projects like these during a visit or vacation to help them feel connected to the destination in a way that a 'tourist' would not. It would be especially interesting to attach a 'donation' fee to help provide additional support for the projects. Thanks!

Submitted on 5 February 2007 by Barb Patricio, Resource Centre for Voluntary Organizations, Edmonton, Alberta Canada

Great topic, Susan. I know of a group within Habitat for Humanity called Care-a-Vanners. The idea is simple: Take your RV - so that you are completely self-sufficient - and help build a house in any number of sites in North America. Great for Canadian snow-birds. It seems to me that a large organization such as Habitat could arrange it so that you are "cleared" through your home organization, which makes me wonder about other national/international organizations.

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