

## Reflections on Voluntourism

A presentation by Paul Miedema to SAYTC (the South African Youth Travel Confederation; formerly BSA - Backpacking South Africa)

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I am neither an expert in this area, nor an academic. I guess the organisers have asked me to deliver an input here today, because Calabash Tours is vocal in the area of Sustainable Tourism, and we have raised concerns about certain practices occurring in this sector. We also run some voluntourism programmes. What I am about to present is not conclusive, is certainly subjective, but is hopefully a way to introduce some of the controversial issues relating to this sector in the travel market. It is also appropriate that this is discussed here at the BSA gathering, as many travellers engaging in voluntourism come from the youth sector.

### What is Voluntourism?

A simple definition of voluntourism would simply be:

A New Trend that combines traditional travel/tourism with volunteer work. Travelers are given opportunities to contribute money and/or time to nature based or community projects.

A more interesting definition, from David Brooks of Wisconsin University is:

"VolunTourism is something that changes the way we see the world and it changes the way the world sees us. It really does work both ways. So, again, there may not be one word beyond Volun-Tourism that describes it but there certainly are references to experience, firsthand personal experience, where tourism, travel, service and learning all fit together in a way that is seamless."

Even more interesting is Christina Heyniger's of Xola consulting in the US:

This thing is tourism, this thing is not; this thing is adventure, and this one is not; this is voluntourism, and this is not is almost an academic exercise. And from our perspective in trying to gauge that for our industry [adventure travel] we learned that really, it almost doesn't matter except to the people within it; because travelers are out there doing what they're going to do anyway."

Historically, voluntourism had far more to do with activism, than with tourism. The roots lie in Kibbutz, missionary trips, and even the Peace Core. It was however for the mainly young, often idealistic, off the beaten track type traveler. An organization called Earthwatch in the 70's started a voluntourism programme – by accident. Running out of money for scientific research, they decided there may be a market from nature loving tourists who would pay vast sums of money in order to watch scientists track wild, often rare and endangered animals. And they were almost right. Except people did not want to passively watch, but wanted to participate, and Earwatch discovered volunteers had the capacity to capture data. This was the first stab at work based tourism.

But simply stated, we are talking about the combination of tourism and volunteer work. And most voluntourism products, particularly that are relevant to us as the tourism industry are those where the tourist/volunteer pays for the experience.

According to the World Bank, volunteer travel is still to new a trend to have accurate statistics. Ecotourism and cultural tourism are however the fastest growing segments for the global tourism industry. Volunteer travel is closely linked to this type of travel.

The fact that I am speaking on this today, and that we have a breakaway session tomorrow on volunteer travel, attests to the fact that this sector in South Africa is rapidly growing. Those of us in the sector will also have plenty of anecdotal evidence that this market is indeed a booming market.

According to the Travel Industry Association of America, more than 55 million Americans have participated in a volunteer holiday. Many of these are conducted within the borders of America.. Volunteer holiday participants are diverse but typically share a desire to “do something good” while also experiencing new places and challenges in destinations they might not otherwise visit.

### **So why do people do it?**

The notion of paying money to go and work in another country, often under difficult circumstances is quite a tricky one to get your head around. When I first introduced the idea of hosting self-funding volunteers in communities Calabash Tours has relationships with, people in those communities struggled to understand this type of travel. Indeed, it is an unusual way of travel.

Volunteers I work with talk of things like giving back to the community, making a difference, cultural immersion, gaining experience for cv's, sharing skills etc.

Personally I think it gives testimony to the dead feelings that many people have as a result of a consumer society gone mad, particularly in the developed North. Where images of poverty and deprivation are carefully managed by the media, and we all know the world is in trouble, but we are told to solve that by looking to Paris Hilton for fashion advice and lifestyle tips.

As South Africans, we are all too aware of our own ability to change the superstructure. We did this a few years ago. We engage actively with issues of transformation in our business activities, and the realities of poverty and inequality are tangible in our everyday lives. We know, as young people, we, each one of us, have to make an impact in this country in order for change the current status quo, which is a status quo lacking in social and economic justice. And this makes us an ideal destination for voluntourism, a country of change, and where as individuals we can make a difference.

I wonder how many South Africans of privilege truly comprehend what a rarity this is, and how grateful we should be to be here, on the southern tip, at this point in history.

Oh, and for the record, volunteers are not all Gap Years. Our company does very little business with Gap Years. We work primarily with retired professionals. Our oldest has been 79. So this type of travel, while dominated in some areas by Youth, also appeals to those on mid career breaks and retired people. Our work has included school children, who come in search of finding out about their African peers, and sharing experiences and often hard physical labour with them.

### **The Issues - Negative Impacts**

While many have celebrated the merging of service to others and development with tourism, some critics have emerged, and correctly so. Things can get complicated when for profit businesses get involved in eco or community based projects. Environmental, and Social sustainability are easily sacrificed at the altar of blatant greed in the tourism industry, which

already has a global reputation for being brutally profit oriented at the expense of the environment and communities. Why should Voluntourism be any different?

There are 2 primary areas of concern for me when looking at this boom in volunteering. The first is the issues relation to legal compliance, and this is an issue within any sector in tourism. We have seen over the years, as South Africa takes up its place in the market, more and more self-regulation. Star grading, SATSA standards etc, which try and ensure that those in the business of tourism are operating within a legal framework. This is critical in building a destination. I think BSA itself is an example of this, where the bar in terms of what is acceptable to the association has been raised over the years. This is not a very contested issue, except by fly by night operators, who are in for the quick buck.

Violations among companies hosting volunteers include issues such as using Game Vehicles on public roads without permits, operating without sufficient passenger and public liability insurance, not having risk assessments in place, not having emergency procedures in place etc. The result of this is that when something does go wrong or someone is injured the operator has no plan, and the end result is a very poor reflection on the destination. I do not think I need to elaborate on this fairly simple point.

Far more contentious I believe are the potential negative impacts for communities, environmental or conservation projects. And secondly, the blatant exploitation of well wishing volunteer travellers.

Let me deal with the latter issue first. There are many anecdotal stories of volunteer exploitation within the volunteer sector, blogs, and newspaper chat forums One I found on the name and shame website irresponsible travel.com tells the story of a volunteer who was sold a placement at a turtle project, only to discover on arrival that the turtles are never to be found at her destination at the time of year she was sold a placement. Another tells the story of a young woman who went to work in an orphanage in Kenya. She was collected at the airport, and dumped at an orphanage where there was no food, little in terms of resources, and her first contact with anyone was two weeks later. Needless to say the young woman was severely traumatised. A colleague of mine who has placements with a marine based research project, on a visit, found a girl who paid 2000 pounds more for the same experience her client was having. The UK based operators was putting an unethically huge mark up on the product. These are clear examples of how paying volunteers are fleeced into poor quality projects.

What is of interest to me, is that when booking a holiday, an ordinary trip, clients will ask for all kinds of details about where they will stay, the kind of transport, hotel etc. However, for some unscrupulous operators, they sell a smoke and mirrors volunteer placement, talking vaguely about money into communities, the cost of research etc, obscuring the details, and making the volunteer feel uncomfortable about asking pointed questions – as it is about helping other you know!

So, like in any other travel transaction, there needs to be an education of the consumer. They need to be encouraged to ask questions. There should be clarity of how much money goes where. Too often volunteers are told money goes into the community, only to be horrified when they find out 75% of the money stayed with the UK or US based agent!

To use our own company and placement agency as an example, volunteers are told exactly how much money goes to the placement agency, how much money goes to transport, accommodation, project management, and finally exactly how much goes to the project. Furthermore, our volunteers, in consultation with the project, identify how the money is used. So those of us that sell or facilitate volunteer placements need to be thorough, and cautious about who we do business with. While it is difficult to turn down business as, we need to develop long-standing partnerships that are sustainable with the source of our business. Its not that complicated. Do you

want to do business with crooks? What are the chances of that leading to a long-term sustainable business for yourself. These are questions we must ask ourselves in any sphere of business.

For host communities, there are a number of issues that need to be considered in order to minimise negative impacts. A common occurrence is that communities, who are often eager for assistance, and vulnerable, are bullied or exploited by volunteer service providers. An example would be when a project receiving volunteers has little say in the volume of volunteers placed. This is not unusual. Very many of the source market agents will sell you a placement over the phone, or internet, as long as you have that credit card handy. The result is sometimes a school with 10 or 12 GAP years hanging around with little to do other than get in the way of work being done. I have witnessed this in the townships of Port Elizabeth.

Community projects, be it school, orphanages or whatever, need to have the final say in who gets placed. Otherwise who is being served? An oversupply of volunteers leads to a poor volunteer experience, for both volunteer and community. So the only interest being served in this example is the money interest.

Another common problem is in how community needs are assessed. And whether individual volunteer skills are matched to community needs. I am not a believer in one size fits all volunteer programmes. I believe skills need to be matched to projects. And I have serious doubts about certain volunteer projects that require no skill, but only labour. Let's face it, we have a unemployment rate of 40%, so cheap labour is not required – especially if it only serves the interest of someone who comes from a well resourced country to have an “Experience”. Volunteer Programmes cannot be allowed to exist at the expense of local communities or local interests.

Locally based volunteer placement agencies need to be assessing needs in the community on an ongoing basis. Needs in development change, community needs are dynamic, so to have a placement that never changes reflects a lack of ongoing needs analysis. How involved are the locals served by the project in inputting around the placements? And what is the capacity of the local project to manage volunteers. These are important questions, which if ignored, result in negative, destructive, sometimes irreversible impacts.

Another sensitive but critical issue is the screening of volunteers. I work with children in poor communities, and with vulnerable adults. What is the potential negative impact if I allow a sexual predator into that community or project? Not all volunteers come with pure intentions. We take our work placements seriously, so seriously that we want references from you before you come. And we check them, or rather our placement agency does. In the UK and many other countries to work with youth, as a church leader, scoutmaster, soccer coach, whatever, you need a criminal screening. Why must we accept less in South Africa or other developing countries?

I trust that you are beginning to see the vast arena of potential negative impact. There are many delicate and sensitive areas that need to be managed from within the destination. It requires a good understanding of working with community, and a good understanding of working in partnership with community projects. It is a fairly specialised area, although judging by all the players coming into the market, who we never saw interested or near communities before, you would never say so.

### **Positive Impacts?**

Despite these potential negative impacts a well prepared, screened, skilled volunteer can make a tremendous positive impact in host communities. Our own experience has been that skills transfer, capacity building, as well as physical infrastructure can be provided from volunteer placements.

Furthermore, well-run volunteer placements can develop a level of social interaction and understanding that is profound. It can result in a the humanising of poverty, it can give a face to poverty and vulnerability that is real, and lead to a sense of a shared humanity.

It is often a life changing experience for the volunteer. An experience that shapes purpose and belief, and can shift consciousness towards the understanding of a shared humanity. It can and does lead to an understanding of our interconnectedness as people.

It also can lead to a well placed understanding of community needs that leads to needs based travellers philanthropy. Again, our own experience attests to this. Volunteers who have been well managed and have developed an understanding and a confidence in a community project where they have worked, are in a good position to go back to there own communities and leverage resources to the advantage of the community or project. The fact that it is based on a real understanding of needs, is often a critical success factor.

As a destination we offer tremendous scope for volunteer placements. As Calabash we see this a potential growth area, and one we will pursue. The market is large, and while competitive, South Africa offers the diversity of community, eco and marine opportunities of voluntourism few countries can match. However, if we do not self regulate this sector, the real threat exists the destinations will become stigmatised as an unethical, exploitative one. This would be a great loss, both to the tourism industry, as well as the many good projects currently benefiting from it.

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