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## **Engaging volunteer tourism in post-disaster recovery in Nepal**

### **ABSTRACT**

There is limited research published on the significance of volunteer tourism in assisting host communities in the recovery of a tourism destination and its industry after a disaster. Our paper addresses this research gap with reference to a case study of Nepal's tourism recovery after the country's 2015 earthquake. We argue that a clear post-disaster volunteer tourism framework could validate volunteer tourism's potential role to ensure that communities do not miss out on any form of assistance that may be of use in re-establishing destination or community lifestyle. Our paper provides an initial exploratory understanding of how post-disaster volunteer tourism might be effective; it uses a disaster management framework to conceptualise the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Disaster recovery; host communities; Nepal; resilience; tourism industry; volunteer tourism.

## Engaging volunteer tourism in post-disaster recovery in Nepal

### Introduction

Travel to a destination after the occurrence of a significant disaster for leisure or recreation purposes is not uncommon (Kelman & Dodds, 2009) and research in this area is well developed (Stone, Hartmann, Seaton, Sharpley, & White, 2018; Wright & Sharpley, 2018). In recent years it is apparent that there is a type of tourist who travels to a destination *immediately* post disaster, in the response or recovery stage. This group of tourists is included in some definitions of ‘disaster tourism’ (Tucker, Shelton, & Bae, 2017; Van Hoving, Wallis, Docrat, & Vries, 2010; Wright & Sharpley, 2018) however Miller (2008, p. 118) notes that “the disaster tourist travels to a disaster scene not to help but to look with interest at the devastation”. The focus of this paper is on those tourists who actively assist in post-disaster recovery. They are also commonly known as ‘volunteer tourists’ (Wearing, 2001; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). The aim of this paper is to provide a conceptual understanding of post-disaster volunteer tourism.

The paper uses a case study focussed on the post-disaster tourism recovery planning which occurred after the 25 April 2015 earthquake and subsequent aftershocks in Nepal. At this time risk assessment and risk management of tourism was a core concern for all sectors of tourism in Nepal, including the volunteer tourism sector. Particular reference is made to the strategic approach and recommendations arising from the 2015 Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Nepal Tourism Rapid Recovery Taskforce, established a few weeks after the earthquake as a joint project of the Nepal Tourism Board, the Nepal Ministry of Tourism, PATA and its Nepal Chapter. Although volunteer tourism is a relatively small sector of inbound tourism to Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2016), it assumed the position as a significant and highly resilient core market after the earthquake.

Our focus on Nepal in this case study is based on the country’s long history of volunteer tourism programs targeting young travellers (Wickens, 2011). It is also a destination with a history of natural disasters such as earthquakes and avalanches (Hough, 2015; Watson, 2017). A number of countries which have experienced similar disasters (see for example the tsunami and earthquakes in Indonesia, Japan and Italy in Guarnacci, 2016; Lin, Kelemen, & Tresidder, 2018; Wright & Sharpley, 2018) could have benefited from volunteer tourism, but simply lacked the volunteer tourism infrastructure Nepal has developed. In recent years, it has become a popular destination for young idealistic travellers from Western countries who are attracted to Nepal’s spectacular scenery and perceived spirituality. Additionally, Nepal has long been regarded as a well-intentioned global citizen, participating in post-disaster and peacekeeping programs in many affected countries. Consequently, when Nepal experienced a major natural disaster, many young travellers were interested in helping. Nepal is a case study that can provide the paper with a means to demonstrate a way to move forward with post-disaster volunteer tourism and also might offer insights for other countries which have experienced natural disasters.

There have been several studies taking different approaches to explore the after effects of the earthquake in Nepal and community disaster recovery (Beirman, Upadhayaya, Pradhananga, & Darcy, 2018; Nepal & Devkota, 2019; Ray, 2017; Upadhayaya, 2015; Watson, 2017). Consequently Watson (2017, p. 484) recommends that there is now “an opportunity for Nepal to ‘bounce forward’ and redefine itself as a post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) disaster resilient and genuinely democratically multi-ethnic nation”. This exploratory paper is unique as it marks a first step in defining the role of post-disaster volunteer tourism. This is in part a response to critics of volunteer tourism’s role in developing countries (Butcher, 2011; Guttentag, 2009; Simpson, 2004).

We ground our work in strategic disaster management framework (Ritchie, 2004, 2008, 2009) and community resilience (Blackman, Nakanishi, & Benson, 2017; Hall, Prayag, & Amore, 2018; Watson,

2017) approaches to destination recovery. In essence, tourism destination recovery after a natural disaster involves a collaborative approach between all sectors of the tourism industry, the destination management organisation and government. As such, we provide a conceptual understanding of how affected destinations and communities can work with various stakeholders in their disaster recovery.

The research questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What was the role of key volunteer tourism stakeholders in the ‘strategic implementation’ stage in post-disaster Nepal?
2. How did volunteer tourism manifest in the ‘strategic implementation’ stage in post-disaster Nepal?

## **Volunteer Tourism**

Volunteer tourism was traditionally viewed as a sustainable alternative form of tourism (McGehee, 2002). While some may argue that it is no longer a niche sector of the tourism industry (Butcher, 2011; Stainton, 2016; Wearing, 2001), the act of travelling to volunteer in developed and developing countries has gained considerable popularity with tourists and is the focus of much academic research (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Wickens, 2011) that Stainton (2016) argues it should now be segmented into several micro-niches. There are numerous social and economic reasons for the growth of volunteer tourism. A study conducted by Nestora, Yeung, and Calderon (2009) on the state of the volunteer travel industry in the United States discusses that the devastation following the September 11 attacks (in 2001) and the Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 2004 made travellers “more aware of the opportunities to have a holiday that involved volunteering”. In the past 15-20 years we have also seen a “reduction in barriers to travel, an increase in the middle class in many developing countries, and the desire of that middle class to seek out more unusual travel experiences” (Wearing & McGehee, 2013, p. 121).

While the volunteer tourist is a traveller, as defined above, Eddins (2013, p. 252) considers volunteer tourists to be the “unsung heroes of development”. At a time when the world is engaging with and progressing sustainable development initiatives, multifaceted partnerships are needing to be forged between local communities, volunteer tourism organisations, host community organisations and the public sector (Eddins, 2013). Yet there are many criticisms of volunteer tourism’s role in development, particularly in the Global South. Godfrey, Wearing, and Schulenkorf (2015) argue that volunteer tourism has been packaged by an industry for the neo-liberal consumption by white, well-educated, young people. In this vein volunteer tourism is viewed as postcolonial Western domination in development processes (Devereux, 2008; Eddins, 2013; Palacios, 2010; Vrasti, 2013). It is possible to view all forms of activity in developing countries from this development/aid perspective (Wearing, Young, & Everingham, 2017). The underlying questions are; what contribution does the practice of volunteer tourism make to those communities and, how can volunteer tourism benefit communities beyond the provision of development aid?

In contrast to this development aid perspective, there is a marketing approach which focuses on volunteer tourism as a niche market within the broader tourism product offerings (Tomazos, 2010; Wymer, Self, & Findley, 2010). Promotion of this niche market is based on its appeal to volunteer tourists, and the level of satisfaction of the volunteer tourist is a critical point of assessment for the industry. Both perspectives are seen as problematic for the future of volunteer tourism and as Wearing et al. (2017) have pointed out there is a need to provide a type of volunteer tourism that sits somewhere in-between existing views.

How do we achieve this goal? The success of volunteer tourism depends on the willingness of volunteer tourists to engage in a travel experience that involves assisting a destination community and engaging in work that more mainstream tourists may view as a ‘hardship’. Many advocates of volunteer

tourism suggest that for volunteer tourism to make a legitimate contribution, it needs to create positive impacts for host communities, especially in less developed countries. It should also develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the volunteer tourists, volunteer tour operators and the host community (Beirman et al., 2018; Butcher & Smith, 2010; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Sin, Oakes, & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). Additionally projects should be driven by the communities in a bottom-up approach.

Unfortunately, the impacts of volunteer tourism on local communities have had little academic attention (Fee & Mdee, 2011; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Tourism Research and Marketing (TRAM), 2008; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). To address this gap, there has been a call for research to focus on the communities' voice, so that they have input into the outcomes of the research and the evolution of volunteer tourism programs (Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Lyons, 2003; Raymond, 2011; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2004; Wearing et al., 2017). This would lead to the reframing of volunteer tourism away from development aid towards intercultural mutuality and de commodification (Wearing et al., 2017).

The above discussion is particularly pertinent to post-disaster destinations. Volunteer tourism, which has a destination specific focus and is adaptable to the changing needs of the community, has the potential to build resilience. To achieve this goal we suggest there is a need to examine volunteer tourism's role in post-disaster destinations via a disaster management framework rather than solely a development aid or marketing perspective.

### **Disaster Management Framework**

Disasters have been defined by Faulkner (2001, p. 138) as "those situations where the event which disrupts the routine of the community concerned, and in response to which adjustments have to be made, is triggered externally". This is so to differentiate them from crises which are less likely to be triggered by sudden events and instead see organisations fail to adapt to ongoing changes or problems (Faulkner, 2001). The two terms are used interchangeably in tourism literature as they share similar characteristics and while we use the term disaster in this study, we include prior research examining crises where it has been instrumental in developing a theoretical framework.

Within the literature there is a range of case studies examining tourism destinations managing the after effects of a disaster (cf. Carlsen & Hughes, 2008; Ladkin, Fyall, Fletcher, & Shipway, 2008; Prideaux, Coghlan, & Falco-Mammone, 2008). The recent plea by disaster management academics is to focus future research on planning, preparedness and mitigation (Mair, Ritchie, & Walters, 2016; Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Ritchie, 2008). In the literature there are a number of disaster management frameworks that might be used to conceptualise post-disaster volunteer tourism. According to Heath (1998) traditional approaches to managing crises followed three phases in a cycle from (1) crisis event/outbreak to (2) response onset and management to (3) learning – the identification of risks, planning and preparedness for future crises. The obvious omission in this cycle, from a risk or strategic management perspective, was an initial planning phase which has since been incorporated in new models. For example Heath's (1998) 4 R model contains reduction, readiness, response and recovery phases. The first 'reduction' phase is focused on risk management.

Another highly cited disaster management framework is Faulkner's (2001) six composite stages in a community's response to a disaster which are: pre-event; prodromal; emergency; intermediate; long term (recovery) and; resolution. This framework has since been modified by others. For example, Ritchie (2004, 2009) aligns the original six stages to three: crisis/disaster prevention and planning; strategic implementation and; resolution, evaluation and feedback. It is during the second stage – strategic implementation – where the emergency occurs and there is intermediate response and long-term recovery.

In taking a strategic approach Ritchie emphasises several critical components during the second stage which include strategic evaluation and control, understanding and coordinating stakeholders, resource management and crisis communication. These components align well with the community development focus of volunteer tourism programs. As explored in the previous section the aim of volunteer tourism is to engage community stakeholders in its sustainable development. The components also address the call for more bottom-up approaches to disaster management to improve community livelihoods and build resilience in less developed countries (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2016; Le Dé, Rey, Leone, & Gilbert, 2018).

Studies have shown that a focus on linear modes of recovery, such as those provided by Faulkner and to some extent Ritchie, can lead to a failure of post-disaster recovery initiatives in the long-term (Blackman et al., 2017; Muskat, Nakanishi, & Blackman, 2014). This is because they ignore the complex nature of communities and that the nature and scale of problems may change over time. With resilience as an integral component of a disaster management framework it acknowledges that stakeholders and communities have agency to take ownership of the recovery process (Larsen, Calgaro, & Thomalla, 2011). It also acknowledges complexity within tourism systems (Strickland-Munro, Allison, & Moore, 2010).

Resilience is the idea that a community can bounce back better after a disaster. Resilience acknowledges that change is occurring in a system which requires adaptation (Hall et al., 2018; Lew, 2014; Strickland-Munro et al., 2010). Community resilience has become popular in disaster management literature as a companion to risk reduction (Blackman et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2018; Watson, 2017). Here communities are given the tools to plan for a disaster. Cheer and Lew (2017, p. 13) explain that “the term ‘community’ is aligned to all stakeholders, implying broad breadth of the community at large”. In tourism destinations, such as Nepal, tourists, albeit transient, are part of the community. Therefore a framework should include this group as a significant stakeholder. This is substantiated by Lin et al. (2018, p. 1766) who, in their study on post-disaster Japan, learnt that the type of tourism that developed in Japan was a “form of resilience which builds around local place-based practices and traditional community knowledge. Consequently, it is capable of achieving sustainable disaster recovery and tourist satisfaction simultaneously”.

The notion of building resilience into a disaster management framework aligns well with the traditional understanding of volunteer tourism as a niche form of sustainable tourism which occurs in and by host communities. Resilient destinations focus on the needs of the wider community. Lew (2014, p. 14) purports that resilience planning has become an “alternative to the sustainable development paradigm to provide new perspectives on community development and socioecological adjustments to a rapidly changing world”. Therefore volunteer tourism might be an appropriate function in post-disaster communities experiencing change. This paper will integrate these ideas with traditional disaster management frameworks of Faulkner and Ritchie through a case study outlining the potential for volunteer tourism to contribute to post-disaster recovery during the ‘strategic implementation’ stage of a disaster.

## **Case Study**

As an exploratory study, this research employs a qualitative case study to address the research questions and provide a conceptualisation of post-disaster volunteer tourism. Case studies are employed by researchers with different epistemologies. We approach this study with a constructivist lens acknowledging that objectivity is not possible because the researcher and the researched are co-constructors of the research, and each has inherent values which influence this process (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). A constructivist case study allows for greater depth of understanding of people, places and events (Stake, 2000) and allows for ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). Thick description is

more than just the presentation of facts (as in thin description); it is about the interpretation of these facts in relation to their contextual setting, other structures and meanings.

The case study site is that of the surrounds of the Nepal earthquake (Gorkha earthquake) in April, 2015. Primary research, in the form of participant observation, was undertaken by one of the co-authors of this paper. This co-author was a contributor to PATA's Nepal Recovery Task Force, as such Nepal was a convenient case study. The involvement of the co-author along with all non-Nepali members of the taskforce was to work with a Nepalese tourism industry leader/ partner to develop a recovery strategy addressing a specific criteria of recovery. In the case of the co-author, this involved traditional media approaches to recovery targeting all segments of the inbound tourism market. The main form of communication between the Task Force members was videoconferencing (by Skype) and from the perspective of participation observation outlined by Musante and DeWalt (2011) they were all active participants.

All international participants in the PATA Recovery Task Force (including the co-author) had extensive experience as either academics or practitioners involved in post-disaster tourism recovery projects. For example, the co-author has been involved in post-crisis tourism recovery programs in Australia, Kenya, Japan, Fiji, Israel, Philippines, and Trinidad and Tobago. PATA established the PATA Rapid Response Tourism Taskforce in 2012 (Beirman, 2015) which focussed on developing strategies to assist all 66 countries within the PATA membership orbit (including Nepal) in the field of risk, crisis and recovery management. The co-author was also co-author of PATA's official risk crisis and recovery management handbook for PATA members (Beirman & Van Walbeek, 2011).

The task force report was presented to Nepal's Tourism Ministry and the tourism industry leadership in June 2015 (PATA2015). In November 2015, the co-author was in Nepal for 10 days as the keynote presenter to a private sector tourism industry recovery workshop organised by Samarth-Nepal Market Development Programme (Nepal Association of Tour and Travel Agents, 2017). During this period he visited many of the damaged areas within a 20 kilometre radius of Nepal's capital Kathmandu. Aside from the full-day workshop attended by 80 Nepalese tourism professionals held on November 22, 2015 he had meetings with 35 tourist professionals from the trekking and adventure tour sectors and discussions with a senior official from Samarth, Nepal who coordinated some of the post-quake recovery volunteer programs in Nepal.

Secondary data was also collected to provide a broad picture of the situation. This included government and industry reports (including the PATA Task Force report), media reports and social media stories. This naturally occurring data (Silverman, 2010) provided rich sources by which to explore the disaster management process in Nepal. The resultant text was collated and underwent a manual coding process to purposefully selected themes according to the steps in the disaster management framework adapted from Ritchie (2004, 2008, 2009). The co-author's meeting and journal notes were used to support the themes identified in the secondary data analysis.

### *Nepali tourism and the 2015 Earthquake*

Tourism is an economically significant industry in Nepal. According to the Nepal Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 798,000 international tourists visited Nepal in 2013. International visitation has undergone significant growth since 1990 when Nepal welcomed 255,000 international visitors (Government of Nepal, 2014). Prior to the 2015 earthquake, the WTTC (2015) forecasted that by 2025 tourism's contribution to Nepal's economy would reach 5% of the country's GDP and international tourism arrivals would exceed 1.4 million.

Although the number of international tourists to Nepal is relatively small by world standards, tourism to Nepal in 2014, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2015), represented 4% of Nepal's GDP and directly contributed 500,000 jobs to the Nepalese economy. The

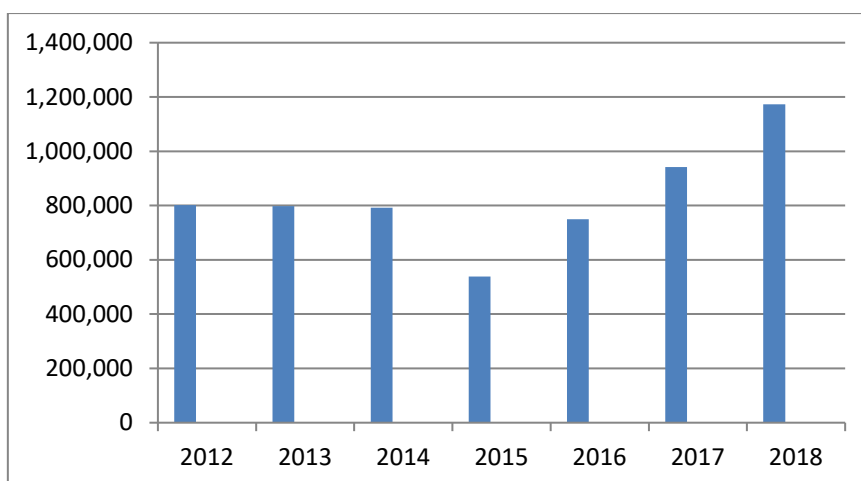
main reason that a relatively small number of tourists generate such a relatively high number of jobs is that specific segments of the Nepalese tourism industry are very labour intensive. This especially applies to the lucrative trekking and mountaineering sectors. These sectors require a large number of guides, porters, drivers and other skilled and unskilled service providers to support trekking and mountain climbing parties. Although trekkers and mountain climbers accounted for 8% of tourism arrivals (just over 75,000 visitors) in 2017 (Government of Nepal, 2018) it was not uncommon that such parties had far more support staff than actual participants. In addition, many of the over 658,000 visitors to Nepal, who are classified as holiday/pleasure visitors, are likely to engage in at least some trekking which involves a high level of staff support.

The prospect for tourism growth to Nepal was severely compromised by the Gorkha earthquake of April 25, 2015 and the subsequent aftershocks. The quake, which measured 8.1 on the Richter scale, caused severe damage to buildings and infrastructure in much of central Nepal and triggered an avalanche on Mt Everest, the world's highest peak. Over 15% of the land mass of Nepal was affected including the capital city Kathmandu. The April 25 quake and the major aftershock of 12 May resulted in over 9,000 deaths in Nepal and 23,000 injuries, the highest casualty rate from a natural disaster in Nepal since a major earthquake in 1934. Among the dead were 89 foreign nationals visiting from 17 countries including India, China, France, Spain, USA Germany, Italy, Japan, Israel, Australia and New Zealand. Many of the foreign deaths included climbers based at Everest Base camp which was inundated by an avalanche killing 19 people (UN Dispatch, 2015).

Large scale natural disasters do not discriminate between local residents and tourists. Foreign tourists visiting Nepal are more geographically dispersed than visitors to most other countries due to the emphasis on ecotourism and trekking. Consequently, they shared a similar likelihood to the resident population of being affected by earthquake damage.

The earthquake and its aftermath had a significant and negative impact on tourism arrivals to Nepal in 2015. The majority of foreign visitors in Nepal left the country and returned to their home countries as soon as they could. According to figures released by the Nepal Tourism Board the number of international tourists to Nepal in 2015 fell by 31.78% compared to the 2014 figures. In 2015, the number of international tourist arrivals in Nepal registered a six year low of 538,970 or 251,148 down from the 2014 total of 790,118 (Government of Nepal, 2016). In the four months immediately following the quake May-August 2015, international tourism arrivals fell by 55.59% over the corresponding period in 2014. As seen in Figure 1 Nepal's tourism industry achieved a significant recovery of international tourist arrivals in 2016. During 2017 and 2018, tourism arrivals continued to soar to an all-time record level of over one million tourists, well above pre-quake tourism numbers demonstrating that Nepal's post-earthquake tourism recovery is well established. Much of this recovery was led by a significant growth in participation in volunteer tourism programs bolstered by positive communication about the region.





**Fig. 1.** International Tourist Arrivals Nepal 2012-2018.

Source: Government of Nepal (2019)

Nepal is well set up for volunteer tourism. There are many organisations which offer short-term travellers the opportunity to volunteer teaching English in Schools (Wickens, 2011). There is also a market for short-term volunteer tourists in health/medical camps who are motivated to volunteer based on the destination (Citrin, 2010; Godkhindi, 2018). As such the market appears to be dominated by NGOs set up to attract altruistic adventurers (Easton & Wise, 2015).

One of the difficulties for this study is ascertaining the precise number of volunteer tourists in Nepal. The calculation of tourism statistics for Nepal by the Nepalese government does not specify volunteer tourism as a unique category when determining tourism arrivals by purpose of visit (Government of Nepal, 2018). This is further complicated by the fact that many package tour programs which may be primarily adventure tours, trekking or exploratory tours contain within them a volunteer component. Consequently there is an element of conjecture arising from attempting to quantify volunteer tourists in Nepal. The specified categories covered in Nepal's tourism statistics are; holiday/pleasure, trekking and mountaineering, business, pilgrimage, official, conference/convention, study research, others and not specified. Volunteer tourists are likely to be found among holiday visitors, trekkers and mountaineers, the others and not specified. A conservative estimate based on 2% of the aforementioned categories would suggest that in 2017 at least 16,000 tourists who visited Nepal engaged in some volunteer program.

#### *The role of key stakeholders in the 'strategic implementation' stage*

In the wake of the 2015 earthquake, the Nepalese tourism industry was anxious to proceed with a tourism recovery program. One of the challenges in developing a coherent national tourism recovery strategy in Nepal is the fragmented nature of Nepal's tourism industry. The Nepal Tourism Board is poorly funded and subject to frequent personnel changes at the ministerial and senior administrative level in Nepal's Ministry of Tourism. Between June and November 2015, three Nepalese tourism ministers had come and gone and consequently private sector tour operators opposed government leadership in national tourism recovery strategy and management due to high management and staff turnover at the government level.

Although a number of Nepalese tourism associations advanced post-earthquake recovery strategies for specific sectors of the tourism industry, the strategy which gained the broadest acceptance at both government and private sector level was PATA's Nepal Rapid Recovery Task Force released to the Nepalese tourism industry in June 2015. The PATA taskforce was essentially a collaborative exercise

between leaders of Nepal's PATA Chapter which involved CEOs from most of Nepal's largest tour operators and a group of international tourism crisis management specialists chosen by PATA who agreed to volunteer their services to contribute to Nepal's tourism recovery. The primary focus of PATA's Nepal recovery strategy was the development of marketing strategies to facilitate tourism recovery. These employed effective social media and traditional media communications; a significant component of strategic implementation in disaster management (Ketter, 2016; Ritchie, 2004, 2008, 2009; Sigala, 2011). In doing so, the PATA strategy targeted and prioritised a number of potential growth markets sectors, one of which was volunteer tourism.

A key distinction of PATA's post-earthquake recovery strategy for Nepal centred on final decisions regarding recommendations and implementation being made by the Nepalese participants. Each section of the report was co-written by a Nepalese tourism leader and an international PATA appointed advisor. In each section, the Nepalese author had the final say on content in the PATA report. The chairs of the PATA Nepal Tourism Rapid Recovery Taskforce, Andrew Jones (PATA's Deputy Chair at the time and PATA Chairman 2016-17) and Dr Bert Van Walbeek, a tourism crisis management expert and Chair of PATA Rapid Response Taskforce, made two visits to Nepal between May and June 2015. (PATA Nepal Chapter 2015) They ran workshops with over 200 Nepalese tourism industry leaders and professionals, established the most critical and achievable recovery goals and prioritised an action plan. Workshop participants came from all sectors of Nepal's tourism industry and the workshops were open to all Nepalese tourism professionals, not just PATA Chapter members. This collaborative approach emphasised the importance of local Nepalese industry stakeholders in the 'strategic implementation' phase.

The resulting 68 page report (PATA2015) focused on eight specific tracks of tourism recovery. They were:

1. International Business to Business recovery with focus on long haul source markets.
2. Asian business to business recovery with focus on inbound tourism from Nepal's short - medium haul Asian source markets including contiguous countries such as India and China, near neighbours including ASEAN countries, Sri Lanka and non-PRC Chinese NE Asian source markets (Japan, Korea, Taiwan).
3. Messaging the tourism accessibility of Nepal to the global tourism industry with a focus on specific market sectors which included the volunteer sector.
4. Social media messaging and key points to the international consumer market.
5. Messaging to the traditional media sources at the business to consumer and the business to business dimension.
6. Recommendations on communicating Nepalese tourism recovery stories to consumers via social media.
7. Redefinition of brand Nepal which included promotion of various forms of tourism.
8. Advancement of business to consumer promotion of tourism recovery to Nepal. This employed traditional media platforms and channels.

The PATA strategy for Nepal's recovery was awarded a Presidential commendation at a ceremony in Kathmandu presided over by Nepal's President Ms Bidya Devi Bhandari on June 8<sup>th</sup> 2017 (PATA, 2017). This was a sign that the results of the strategic implementation stage were viewed favourably by the government.

PATA is a well-respected transnational tourism organisation in Nepal and indeed throughout southern Asia. PATA has a large Chapter membership base in Nepal which comprises of the Nepal Tourism Board and most of the top 50 private sector companies in Nepalese tourism. A strategic report conducted under the auspices of PATA had the benefits of being perceived as more objective, independent and as a consequence more legitimate than a report produced by one of Nepal's many

national tourism associations.

*The manifestation of volunteer tourism in the 'strategic implementation' stage*

The PATA recovery tracks, especially those pitched to Western countries, included volunteer tourism as a significant element of the wider tourism target market; this group was labelled 'international recovery volunteers' by PATA (2015). The involvement of volunteers during Nepal's strategic implementation stage involved three key forms of volunteer tourism (de Swarte, 2015; Volunteers Initiative Nepal, 2018):

- (a) International and national organisations managed by government agencies, NGOs and not for profit organisations organizing volunteer programs pitched at post-disaster recovery and development;
- (b) Individuals either approaching or being sought by local communities; and
- (c) Volunteer programs embedded within tour and trekking programs

Immediately after the 2015 earthquake, very few tourists, especially those with professional and trade skills, remained in Nepal. Some of these tourists were readily absorbed into Nepal's extensive volunteer tourism infrastructure. The presence of rescue and relief crew from over 40 countries presented another opportunity for those tourists who had special trade and professional skills to contribute to the many government and NGO relief crews. The types of essential assistance given by volunteers included reconstruction and medical rehabilitation; UN Volunteers (2016) mobilised 107 volunteers in Nepal to assist with structural assessments of buildings and the clearing of debris. This responded to the Nepalese government's call for assistance in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.

In 2015 and 2016 Nepal hosted three global celebrities whose widely publicised visits raised the profile and popular appeal of tourism (especially volunteer tourism) in Nepal. In May 2015 Hollywood actress Susan Sarandon visited Nepal and actively promoted volunteer tourism to Nepal to the North American market (The Telegraph, 2015). In mid-2015 Hong Kong based actor Jackie Chan visited and encouraged Chinese tourists and volunteers to come to Nepal. He spent a few hours in the country distributing relief materials (Press Trust of India, 2015). In March 2016 Prince Harry (the younger son of Prince Charles) spent two weeks in Nepal engaged in volunteer programs. While positive for Nepal's volunteer tourism sector, this was not organised as a tourism related visit. The hosting of celebrity visitors from key source markets was an integral element in PATA's Nepal recovery strategy.

In the context of Nepal's overall post-earthquake tourism recovery Upadhyaya (2015) pointed out that "engaged tourists", including volunteer tourists, are central to Nepal's post-earthquake recovery strategy for at least three years after the April 2015 earthquake. According to the Nepal Association of Tour and Travel Agents (2017) 30% of tours booked to Nepal in the two years after the earthquake comprised groups who combined a tourism experience (eg. trekking) with volunteering and philanthropy.

It is clear that volunteer tourism has been a core element in the rapid recovery of tourism to Nepal since the 2015 earthquake (Beirman et al., 2018; de Swarte, 2015; Nicholls, 2018). Increasingly, tour operators and trekking programs include volunteer components in their programs, in response to increasing consumer demand for this form of engagement with Nepalese communities, especially those most affected by the 2015 quake.

In the Nepalese context, NGO volunteer programs which include travel and logistical arrangements are technically illegal. The NGO cannot package a volunteer program with other functions such as flights and accommodation. In other words legal NGO volunteer programs commence and finish at the door of the community or institution in which volunteering occurs. Consequently, many of Nepal's

volunteer programs were embedded in trekking and tour operators' programs (Beirman et al., 2018). Some package tour programs, especially those undertaken by tour operators pitched at the youth market, tend to include or offer the option of a few days set aside for volunteer work in small Nepalese villages. For example, World Expeditions assisted in the intermediate and long-term stages of the recovery process by sending unskilled travellers to volunteer for a one to two day period (Nicholls, 2018). These volunteer tourists worked alongside locals doing hard labour tasks which did less to interfere with the emergency response. Another example of intermediate to long-term disaster relief was the volunteers working with women to plan for future tremors and earthquakes (de Swarte, 2015).

The significant involvement of volunteer tourism operators in Nepal generates a range of ethical challenges. In many cases the needs of the tourists (customer) take precedence over the needs of the community in which volunteering takes place. Other problems include poor relations between volunteers and the local community. Negative issues identified in the literature and secondary data include lack of financial transparency, non-compliance with responsible business practice and mismanagement by tour operators of relations between the local community and the volunteers (Beirman et al., 2018; Encounters Nepal, 2017; Moving Mountains, 2017; Tourism Concern, 2017; Upadhayaya, 2015; Weibel, 2012).

One of the chief concerns in determining a volunteer tourism strategy for Nepal following a disaster was to ensure that volunteers came equipped with more than good intentions but with skills and work programs which could meaningfully contribute to destination community and infrastructure recovery. The concept of Dark Tourism or 'thanatourism' (Stone et al., 2018; Wright & Sharpley, 2018) involves people who are attracted to visit a destination to 'view' the site of a current or past disaster. To prove useful volunteer tourism needs to go far beyond a voyeuristic view of a disaster with a tokenistic few days of volunteer work. Kelman and Dodds (2009) work points the way where they have developed a set of ethical guidelines for tourists and tourism businesses engaged in tourism activities during and immediately after a disaster. The ethical guidelines included:

1. The priority of disaster volunteering should focus on the needs of the affected community,
2. The authorities in a disaster zone should set and determine the rules of engagement between volunteers and the local community.
3. Volunteers should not be expected to undertake risk without their clear consent.
4. Donations or assistance to affected communities should be considered in a local context.

In Nepal there was real concern expressed by a number of sources that volunteer tourism was operating as more of a commercial business enterprise than as a source of sustainable post-earthquake recovery and social enhancement for affected communities (Beirman et al., 2018). Nepalese scholar and tourism practitioner, Pranil Upadhayaya (2015) has written about the shortcomings of volunteer tourism programs in Nepal. His primary criticism focusses on the disconnect between the community of association responsible for the volunteer project and the travel industry which channels volunteers to it. Nepal's regulatory environment prevents any organisation from combining both roles.

However, there was evidence to show how volunteer tourism can contribute positively. The Volunteer Service Overseas (2017) view volunteer tourism as an expression of solidarity between the global community of tourists and those destinations which have been affected by a disaster. At all times they stress the primacy of volunteerism as a selfless act focusing on the needs of victims. These ideas are substantiated by local organisations such as Volunteers Initiative Nepal (2018) who set a standard with several projects available for volunteer tourists including: Water Sanitation and Hygiene, Rebuilding Earthquake Resistant Infrastructure, Earthquake Resistant Home Construction Education, and Entrepreneurship Building. However they made it clear that volunteers with special skills should apply and that they may be asked to switch to another project depending on where the need is at the time. This suggests a sustainable community driven rather than market driven approach to destination

recovery.

Tourism Concern<sup>i</sup> was one of a number of NGOs to address the ethics of volunteer tourism. In their ethical travel guide for volunteers Tourism Concern (2016) included some critical points:

1. Understand the value and objectives of the chosen organization and establish where they are compatible with you as a volunteer.
2. How do they work with the community?
3. Do they work in collaboration with a local partner organization?
4. What is the nature of the volunteer work being undertaken?
5. What pre-departure training will be provided and how much training and support for volunteers will be available on site?

All of the ethical issues posed above were of great significance to ensure that volunteer tourists who came to Nepal after the earthquake played a constructive role in Nepal's recovery process apart from swelling tourism arrival statistics (Beirman et al., 2018). UN Volunteers (2016, p. 13) reported that:

*Working with local volunteers, the UN Volunteers were effective in building rapport and in quickly assimilating into the community in order to nurture trust and healthy relationships with the local people, which were requisites for the successful implementation of earthquake response efforts*

To encourage a dialogue in the process, the local NGO Next Generation Nepal and its partner organisations set up a series of discussion forums called 'Wisdom Wednesdays' between March and May, 2016. Experts shared stories and insights about working in Nepal and offered "tips and advice for travellers, volunteers, tourism professionals and others on how to avoid common pitfalls and scams and make your experiences in Nepal positive and fulfilling" (Punaks, 2016).

### **Discussion: Ethical volunteer tourism in post-disaster destinations**

In times of national crisis, the priority of a government is the welfare of its people. However, the process by which welfare is restored is multifaceted. In destinations which rely on tourism as a primary source of foreign investment, building tourism into the recovery process makes sense. The focus on tourism does not have to detract from other critical processes such as providing healthcare and emergency services, clearing debris and construction. However, while this makes sense in theory it rarely occurs in practice. Natural disasters by their very nature sow confusion, severe damage to infrastructure and great strain on emergency management and administration. This is evidenced in Japan which is often regarded as the global leader in risk management (Takamatsu, 2014) and it is the reason why Blackman et al. (2017) note that disaster resilience is a complex problem.

Our findings show that when done in an ethical manner which is considerate of the local conditions and community, volunteer tourism can aid a destination in the recovery process and enhance destination resilience. We are able to view this process through a disaster management framework which emphasises strategic evaluation and control, understanding and coordinating stakeholders, resource management and crisis communication in strategic implementation (Ritchie, 2004, 2008, 2009).

PATA's response in the wake of the earthquake demonstrated the first component of strategic implementation: Strategic evaluation and control. PATA was a central organisation with government support. Their actions were participatory in nature (Reggers, Grabowski, Wearing, Chatterton, & Schweinsberg, 2016) involving coordinated workshops with a range of tourism industry representatives. The resultant report set out a practical plan centred on marketing and communication for industry sectors to recover from the disaster. This made for a collective coordinated response. While private sector involvement in community development has been criticised, McEwan, Mawdsley, Banks, and Scheyvens (2017) explain that if it is aligned with government planning, the development can prove

successful and beneficial for communities.

The second component of strategic implementation is understanding and coordinating stakeholders. There are three significant stakeholders which need to be acknowledged in order to promote ethical post-recovery volunteer tourism which would not perpetuate neo-colonial stereotypes of volunteer tourism; the volunteer tourist, volunteer organisations and the host community. PATA's (2015) report suggests international recovery volunteers were deemed to be a significant element of the wider tourism market. However, volunteer tourism to Nepal has a far greater appeal to Nepal's long haul source markets of Europe, Australasia and North America than it does from its short-medium haul Asian source markets which visit Nepal largely for reasons of business, VFR (visiting friends and relatives), religious pilgrimage or short term holidays. Notably, volunteer tourists tend to stay longer in Nepal than holiday tourists or even adventure trekkers (other than serious mountaineers). This has made them a commercially desirable sector for Nepal. Nepal offers a wide variety of volunteer tourist experiences and programs. They range from tour programs which may incorporate a short taste (one–seven days) of a volunteer work program, embedded into a holiday or an adventure package tour, to extended volunteer programs spanning weeks or months, most of which are offered by specialist non-government volunteer and development agencies.

The wide range of organisations involved in engaging the volunteer tourist include tour operators, environmental and humanitarian NGOs, and academic groups. Volunteer tourism organisations connected with NGOs have the potential to expand their impact beyond volunteer tourism. In prior research this has been connected with projects that can assist in community development, scientific research, or ecological and cultural restoration (Brightsmith, Stronza, & Holle, 2008; Wearing, 2004). Here we can add post-disaster volunteering as a 'good practice' which can maximise potential benefits and reduce potential negative impacts (McGehee & Andereck, 2008; Ong, Pearlman, Lockstone-Binney, & King, 2013; Taplin, Dredge, & Scherrer, 2014). In a post-disaster framework volunteer tourism organisations can be considered to have the potential to act as catalysts for positive socio-cultural change rather than when framed in a development aid or marketing context, where they are often seen as facilitators of neo-colonialism and dependency (Palacios, 2010).

Within Ritchie's (2004, 2008, 2009) disaster management framework there is a space for the third, non-government sector to contribute in a way which is different to the traditional development aid model. (This has also been the result of empirical research on volunteer tourism (Fogarty, 2005; Sin, 2010; Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005) and disaster management (Coate, Handmer, & Choong, 2006; Robinson & Jarvie, 2008). In this respect NGOs can target the right types of volunteers (skilled v unskilled) at the right times. Our results support the contribution of NGOs in a disaster management framework. As was seen in the case study, it was in the early stages of strategic implementation (emergency – intermediate) that NGOs worked with skilled volunteers who assisted with recovery efforts in Nepal. Then at later stages (intermediate – long-term), unskilled volunteers, in their association with local and international NGOs, assisted local communities in the re-build. Also, celebrities were used to communicate that Nepal was 'open for business'.

Volunteer tourists and volunteer tourism organisations make up two of the three major stakeholders of volunteer tourism. The host community forms the third, and arguably most important, stakeholder in Himalayan tourism (Singh, 2002). In general, the volunteer tourism literature has focused less attention on the host, either individually or as a community (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Holmes, Smith, Lockstone-Binney, & Baum, 2010; Sin, 2010). It has been cited that members of the host community are often inaccessible to researchers or unable to participate, due to socio-cultural, economic, or language difference (McGehee & Andereck, 2008). Yet to avoid volunteer tourism acting as or replacing development aid in post-disaster destinations, local community involvement and agency is critical (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009).

Wearing and Grabowski (2011, p. 205) argue that when a community is "given ownership and

power over the programs, they create an equitable relationship with the volunteers, one that sees both parties strive to achieve the same goals”. This proved to be successful in post-earthquake and tsunami Japan, 2011, when local fisherman coined the term Blue Tourism based on the colour of the surrounding waters. Lin et al. (2018, p. 1781) found that “Blue Tourism has brought vitality to the town, and its bottom-up community approach is less likely to create ethical issues for the locals as it is initiated by the local fishermen in cooperation with other community members”. Within a resilience framework community is the wider network of actors in the tourism system (Strickland-Munro et al., 2010). The findings in this paper demonstrated how local Nepalese tourism industry experts were involved in the PATA recovery process. They provided significant input, in numerous workshops, into the recommendations for the recovery and sustainability of tourism and volunteer tourism industries. The findings also demonstrated how local NGOs took the initiative in post-disaster Nepal through a staged process of targeting volunteers. However, hearing local individual stories about the implementation of these strategies is an area that needs further attention and we note would be a significant step in the next stage of developing post-disaster volunteer tourism strategies.

It is clear that in the event of a disaster on the scale of Nepal’s 2015 earthquake, and subsequent large scale disasters such as the 2018 Sulawesi tsunami, that effective and meaningful leverage of volunteer tourism should be a strategically phased, multi-stakeholder approach. The first phase, immediately post disaster and with the assistance of volunteer organisations, should prioritise highly skilled professionals, emergency management specialists or tradespeople as volunteers. Only when core infrastructure is working can a wider net be cast for volunteers with more generic skills.

The recovery process was aided by effective communication – the second component of strategic implementation. Generic disaster management literature suggests that planning in post-disaster destinations should include collaborative communication between several parties including the public, private and third sectors in order to formulate appropriate recovery strategies. The involvement of three high profile celebrities encouraging volunteer tourism was significant in rebuilding confidence in Nepal as a destination and highlighting the volunteer tourism sector. This communication response goes beyond traditional media streams to social media platforms, which Ketter (2016) argues speaks to audience (tourist) emotions and altruism, reduces the scale of the crisis and can change the target audience in the affected area. The social media approach to disaster communication was also heavily emphasised within PATA’s eight tracks of tourism recovery.

The final component of strategic implementation is resource management. In the context of Nepal, the implementation of post-disaster volunteer tourism was easy and we argue sustainable because there was a natural alignment with Nepal’s pre-disaster volunteer tourism industry. As Lin et al. (2018) argue the type of tourism created post disaster should not be based on the disaster itself. It should be framed around the region and activities available any time. Therefore the Blue Tourism initiative in Japan was sustainable (Lin et al., 2018). In destinations that already target volunteer tourists, such as Nepal, communities become more socially resilient to disasters and have a network of stakeholders and an established infrastructure which can bounce back after the disaster.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to provide an initial exploratory examination of the role volunteer tourism might have in a post-disaster context. The paper outlined the demand for implementing volunteer tourism in developing countries in times of crisis. It also addressed the ethical aspects of post-disaster volunteer tourism which focussed on a stakeholder approach inclusive of the local community. Finally, the paper addressed how volunteer tourism can fit within an overall disaster management framework for a tourism destination prone to natural disasters to foster resilience.

There is no doubt that debates about what volunteer tourism offers the tourism industry and greater

society will continue to be contentious (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). The case study reveals how volunteer tourism has become an important part of Nepal's overall tourism market and a core element of the post-earthquake recovery strategy. This is despite the relatively small number of volunteer tourists when compared with other types of tourists who visit Nepal such as the trekking market. In order to effectively assess the significance of volunteer tourism, the Nepalese government needs to ensure that volunteer tourists are clearly identified as a discreet sector of the inbound tourism market. Currently, due to the fact that volunteer tourists to Nepal could be classified as trekkers, religious pilgrims or even tourists, the best researchers are able to do is to make an educated guess at the true scale of volunteer tourism in Nepal.

There are several ways that volunteer tourism can enable recovery in a destination such as Nepal in the aftermath of a natural disaster. First, a number of foreign tourists, especially those with professional or trade skills, should be invited to stay and volunteer to help emergency services in the reconstruction of cities and towns and to assist medical organisations. Volunteer tourists, especially those located in isolated villages, are willing to accept the same dangers as local residents. Second, a communications strategy which includes high profile celebrities promoting the destination's plight and the need for engagement at the time, could be employed. Third, there are increasing opportunities for tourists to contribute their assistance through structured volunteer tourism programs that recruit people without specialised professional skills in the recovery process for longer periods of time (longer than the typical tourist stay in the country). Organisations which provide these structured programs are key tourism stakeholders who can help to make a significant difference. This long-term approach became evident in Nepal one to two years after the disaster.

Other disaster-prone destinations can benefit from the results presented here. Volunteer tourism can grow and become an enduring element of a destination's tourism market in order that there is a mobilised sector of the destination ready to assist and recover. However, the destination needs to take a multi-stakeholder approach in planning for the disaster recovery process. One of the main critiques is the way in which volunteer tourism in general becomes enmeshed in top-down planning approaches as well as the lack of clear strategies to develop the industry. This paper has begun to unpack how bottom-up strategic approaches might work in post-disaster recovery. Yet our findings were limited by the methodological approach which focussed on the local tourism industry in Nepal. As this case was highly exploratory we recommend future research be conducted to investigate these bottom-up approaches further with a greater range of stakeholders taken into consideration.

Our paper has contributed to disaster management research which calls for resilience to be included in the framework (Larsen et al., 2011). We position volunteer tourism as an integral component in a disaster management framework which instils destination resilience. Volunteer tourism at its best, involves an intense level of engagement between the local or international tourism operator, the tourist and the local community. There are sustainable outcomes when volunteer tourism organisations foster and promote this relationship. Resilience is essential to post-disaster recovery as it considers that there are many changes which can occur in communities and planning for these changes can ensure the longevity of community based tourism initiatives such as volunteer tourism (Lew, 2014). Applying solely a development aid approach or marketing approach is not the answer to disaster management in developing countries; it should support local community mechanisms and systems (Le Dé et al., 2018). Framing post-disaster volunteer tourism between development aid and marketing minimises the focus of the dark tourism gaze (Tucker et al., 2017; Wright & Sharpley, 2018) which can reinstate postcolonial tendencies. Instead, the right type of tourist, a volunteer tourist who is akin to a young and adventurous crisis-resistant tourist (Hajibaba, Gretzel, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2015), is encouraged to travel.

Finally, further research is required on the planning and management of volunteer tourism at both the regional and national level within a strategic and sustainable disaster management framework (Calgaro, Dominey-Howes, & Lloyd, 2014). The authors believe this is critical if a country such as



Nepal is to maximise the positive benefits and minimise the negative impacts of post-disaster volunteer tourism.

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<sup>i</sup> In September 2018 Tourism Concern was forced to close due to high financial costs of running a not-for-profit organisation.