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# I **Journeys Beyond Otherness: Communities, Culture and Power**

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# 1

## Volunteer Tourism as Alternative Tourism: Journeys Beyond Otherness

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Seismic changes in leisure time, disposable income, mobility and communication technologies have created a context in which tourism has thrived, grown and diversified to encompass a wide array of leisure travel behaviours that were not imagined even as recently as a couple of decades ago. Leading the way in this process of diversification is alternative tourism, which describes a form of tourism that rebukes mass tourism and the consumptive mindset it engenders and instead offers alternative, more discriminating, socially and environmentally sustaining tourist experiences (Wearing, 2001). The demand for alternative tourism has led to a diverse array of niche products and services, each the subject of critical scholarly analysis including educational tourism, farm tourism, cultural exchange tourism, scientific tourism and volunteer tourism, which is the subject and focus of this book.

Definitions of volunteer tourism have begun to emerge in the academic and popular literature and are cited in a number of the case studies presented in this volume. Some of these definitions are relatively narrow in their focus. For example, Wearing (2002) defines volunteer tourists as those who 'volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve the aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment' (p. 240). This definition uses criteria that limit volunteer tourism to those experiences located within the context of holidays or vacations. Others such as Uriely *et al.* (2003) take a more macro-approach and consider the more inclusive notion of volunteering in tourism as an 'expression of what is recognized in tourism literature as the "other" dimension of postmodern tourism, which emphasizes the growing appeal of concepts such as "alternative", "real", "ecological", and "responsible" forms of tourism' (p. 61). While specific definitions are used in some of the contributions to this book to frame individual case studies, we have resisted the temptation to offer an overarching definition of volunteer tourism for this volume. Instead we recognize volunteer

tourism as a form of contested alternative tourism. This contestation is further explored later in this chapter.

## Focus and Purpose: An International Case Studies Perspective

This book focuses upon the phenomenon of volunteer tourism, its sources and its development as a concept. In this book we have cast the net relatively widely and have sought out case studies that exemplify and capture the breadth of a phenomenon that continues to grow. In the case studies presented here we have attempted to engage critically with the ideas and ideals of volunteer tourism and recognize the transformative power of volunteer tourism. We feel the following chapters provide a balanced blend of theoretical, conceptual and empirical analysis while also providing rich descriptions of volunteer tourism as it manifests in diverse contexts. This book emphasizes micro-social elements that are fundamental to conceptualization of the tourist and the tourist destination. This emphasis is often overlooked in the sociological analysis of the tourist experience, where the focus has generally been on more macro-social influences, impacts of tourism upon destinations, the quality of the tourist experience and industry construction of the experience. Drawing on concepts from interactionist and post-structural theories among others, this book critiques the ideas inherent in the paradigm of mass tourism that has dominated tourism research, where it is assumed that all tourists are escaping from the city, 'sightseeing' with 'authenticity' in a tourist destination offered as 'image' for the tourist 'gaze'.

These case studies not only demonstrate the impact this form of tourism can have on volunteers and host communities but also consider the broader social and political implications of these impacts. Part of the purpose of this book is to begin seeking answers to a number of questions that will advance critical understanding of this burgeoning area of alternative tourism. These questions include: What are the potential positive social and environmental benefits of volunteer tourism? What are the prerequisites for a successful experience? What is the nature of the experience? What messages does the visitor receive? What attitudes do they take away? In working with communities, what are the key issues leading to successful outcomes? Where has it worked and why? What are the key problems and issues to be overcome? How do host communities experience volunteers? What are the overlaps and synergies within other cognate areas of study? Not all of these questions are fully answered in these case studies; however, the ideas presented here are designed to start a dialogue that will help develop deeper understanding.

## Background – The Rise of Alternatives

Tourism has long been hailed a significant and fast-growing global phenomenon worthy of critical analysis. Much of the initial sociological work on tourism was concerned with the individual tourist and the part that holidays and vacations play in establishing identity and a sense of self. This self was predomi-

nantly posited as a universal, and tourism, like leisure, was seen in a dialectical relationship with the 'workaday world'. Cohen and Taylor (1976), for example, drew on Goffman's (1959) concern with the presentation of self in everyday life, to argue that vacations are culturally sanctioned escape routes from paid work for Western travellers. One of the key challenges for the modern traveller, in this view, is to establish identity and a sense of personal individuality in the face of the anomic forces of a technological world. Holidays and vacations provide freedom to mentally and physically escape from the immediacy of the multiplicity of impinging pressures in technological society. According to Cohen and Taylor (1976), the tourist uses all aspects of the holiday/vacation for the manipulation of well-being.

However, while the examination of the self continued in the cognate area of leisure studies, in the tourist literature, these arguments became diverted into a debate about the authenticity or otherwise of this experience (cf. MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988), serving to focus attention on the attractions of the tourist destination. Such a shift objectified the destination as place – a specific geographical site was presented to the tourists for their gaze (Urry, 1990). Thus, the manner of presentation became all important and its authenticity or otherwise the focus of classifying analysis: 'I categorised objects of the gaze in terms of romantic/collective, historical/modern, and authentic/unauthentic', says Urry (1990, p. 135). Tourists themselves became synonymous with the Baudelarian flaneur: '[T]he strolling flaneur was a forerunner of the twentieth century tourist' (Urry, 1990, p. 138). This flaneur was generally perceived as escaping from the workaday world for an 'ephemeral', 'fugitive' and 'contingent' leisure experience (cf. Rojek, 1993, p. 216). In such an analysis, tourism becomes a mass phenomenon predicated on ontological universal categories with sharply dichotomous conceptions utilized to account for the dynamic processes, interrelations and inherent divergences of tourism experiences.

Ensuing debates about tourism have critically linked the debates about authenticity to broader macro-social issues associated with the globalization of mass tourism. Increasingly there is recognition that in mass tourism marginalized communities have rarely (if at all) had their voices heard. The host communities who are the recipients of mass tourism have little or no ability to influence its construction.

The complexity of cross-cultural issues inherent in the tourist experience that was omitted in earlier analyses is beginning to emerge. Recognition of the increasing domination of the market by multinational corporations, and the increasing proliferation of 'cashed-up' but time-poor tourism consumers, has led governments, researchers and tourism bodies to view mass tourism as highly consumptive, which has had an irreversible impact upon a range of natural and cultural environments globally. This analysis and critique of mass forms of global tourism has led to a search for, and growing interest in, alternatives. Alternate conceptualizations of tourism have been developed that provide additional elements or dimensions to the current perspectives in current sociological analyses of the tourist phenomenon, which tend to continue to emphasize tourists and tourism as consumptive rather than alternative, productive and sustainable praxes.

It has been claimed that alternative tourism reconfigures the tourist destination as an interactive space where tourists become creative actors who engage in behaviours that are mutually beneficial to host communities, and to the cultural and social environment of those communities. From these alternative tourism interactions tourists take home an experience which is potentially life-changing and, at minimum, impacts on the self in some way (Butler, 1990; Wearing, 2002).

The 'alternative turn' in tourism first became most notably evident with the development of ecotourism, which has gone on to become a major player in the global tourism industry. However, some have suggested that ecotourism has undergone a process of commodification over the last two decades and is now little more than another niche product that can be developed and sold to the mass tourism market (Wearing *et al.*, 2005). Other forms of alternative tourism have also emerged in recent times but it is volunteer tourism that has become the new 'poster-child' for alternative tourism in the past few years.

Volunteer tourism is a term that has been used to describe a wide range of tourist behaviours and tourism products and services and is now one of the fastest-growing forms of alternative tourism. Indeed the definition and boundaries that constitute volunteer tourism are in flux as new and existing intersections between volunteers and travel stake a claim to the volunteer tourism brand. Volunteer tourism is increasingly viewed and marketed by governments, non-government agencies and private-commercial operators globally as a creative and non-consumptive solution to a wide range of social and environmental issues that manifest in diverse communities globally. However, this view is based on the often unchallenged belief in a symbiotic relationship between volunteering and tourism – in reality this relationship is complex and fraught with potential inequities and challenges. This complexity can be seen when observing the challenges faced by communities who host volunteer tourists and the role taken primarily (thus far) by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who act as a conduit between volunteers and these communities. The remainder of this chapter explores the role of NGOs in volunteer tourism as a foundation and introduction to the chapters in Part I of this volume.

In particular, the following discussion presents and challenges a key argument raised in other work primarily by Wearing and associates (see Wearing, 2001; Wearing and McDonald, 2002; Wearing *et al.*, 2005) that the decommodified philosophy that underpins NGOs who provide volunteer tourism is essential for ensuring that the needs of host communities are placed before the bottom line of transnational corporations who have vested interest in commercializing volunteer tourism products.

## NGOs and a Decommodification Agenda

NGOs have emerged in the last decade as one of the principal advocates and implementers of sustainable tourism (Wearing *et al.*, 2005). They have also played a major role in specific areas of tourism including volunteer tourism (Wearing, 2001). For NGOs tourism is not just an 'industry' or activity

that serves the needs of those who desire a 'holiday' or an escape away from home – instead they view tourism with the intention of effecting new and positive attitudes, values and actions in the tourist and the host community (Wearing *et al.*, 2005).

NGOs look to assist communities by carrying out a range of activities and projects. Examples of this include environmental education, the fostering of attitudes and behaviours that are conducive to maintaining natural and social environments and empowering host communities to operate and maintain sustainable approaches to industry such as tourism (Wearing and McDonald, 2002). NGOs present the case that social ethics introduces notions of empowerment and control for local communities, as well as issues of equity regarding benefit and access.

Numerous studies have revealed the disempowerment that host communities feel as a consequence of tourism in their community. NGOs often engage in tourism with the aim of achieving socially appropriate tourism, which is defined as having community support and involving the host community in decision making (Hall, 1991). They aspire to benefit local (or host) communities directly and assist in providing real benefits that are ongoing within those communities and that can also be controlled at the local level.

Many NGOs are committed to specifically undertaking projects and programmes in developing nations. These programmes have evolved out of a tradition of overseas volunteer organizations that work on projects of community service, medical assistance and scientific discovery. A number of these organizations have recently begun to recognize how their programmes may be appealing to tourists as a form of personal development. Indeed NGOs who offer volunteer tourism opportunities have developed a niche within the tourism industry where the personal development of the tourist is atypical.

In many ways NGOs demonstrate best practice in alternative tourism, and volunteer tourism specifically. Most notably, NGOs place tourist development approaches that are inclusive of indigenous and/or host communities as a priority. They place a high priority on the quality of interactions between tourists and host communities and recognize that this interaction must move beyond superficiality (Wearing, 2001). These priorities are consistent with the de-commodification agenda that underpins alternative tourism.

Conversely a corporate approach to supporting local communities through sustainable tourism development has emerged which embraces not only volunteer tourism but also alternative tourism in general, and is far from best practice (Wearing *et al.*, 2005). It has been argued that corporate philosophies and ideologies are fundamentally underpinned by capital accumulation logic of profit before people (Elliott, 2002).

In a free-market society many would argue that profit-for-shareholder philosophies are completely justified. Over the past few years, however, there has been a gradual change in corporate philosophies as they scramble to harness the growing market desire for global economic, social and environmental equality. Many corporations represent this growing societal movement by selling 'social responsibility' or 'sustainable' policies and programmes to their various markets. However, Elliott (2002) argues that corporations, particularly those

that are transnational, are involved with many of the world's largest projects in developing nations around the world. These projects are carried out in partnerships with governments and other large corporate entities that effectively exclude the involvement of local communities. Elliott goes on to argue that, as a result, transnationals are responsible for extensive environmental degradation and resource depletion while they cast themselves as corporate environmentalists upon whom we can rely for the solutions to sustainable development. To ensure survival, corporations rely on investor confidence – which is naturally buoyed by profit earnings. Governance resides in the hands of a multitude of shareholders whose overriding motives are dividends, not environmental, social and economic responsibility.

In contrast, NGOs are funded by public memberships, public and private institutions and donations from philanthropic organizations that look to support the various missions that NGOs undertake, for example, poverty alleviation, education, health and environmental sustainability. UN-sponsored research has found that many corporations from the OECD flout their environmental responsibilities by paying an estimated \$80 billion a year, in the form of bribes or cash donations, to governments of developing countries to win support for their so-called sustainable growth activities (Khan, 2002).

Liu (2003) argues that in less-developed countries poverty and social desperation necessitate a great need for the local community to benefit from tourism development. However, too often the inability of the host population to fully participate in the development process results in the lion's share of tourism income being taken away or 'leaked' out from the destination (Liu, 2003). These commodifying processes occur when the final outcome is defined as the economic use-value of a product or service.

Current trends in tourism continue to move towards the increasing commodification of tourism in the search for global profits. The negative impacts of such a trajectory on the tourism experience require decommodifying actions, best informed by alternative philosophies and theoretical perspectives that include feminism, ecocentrism, community development and post-structuralism. NGOs provide avenues to pursue decommodification in tourism as they move beyond the almost exclusive pursuit of industry profits and are able to place social, cultural and ecological value on local environments and communities. Sitting outside the mainstream commodified free-market process, NGOs are able to provide us with examples of policy strategies that may move the tourism industry towards more decommodified practice (Wearing and McDonald, 2002; Wearing *et al.*, 2005).

## Volunteer Tourism, Power and Host Communities

Clearly, the argument outlined above posits NGOs as 'all good' – and corporate and commercial interests as 'all bad'. However, this starkly dichotomous view does not account for the increasingly blurry and overlapping relationships that are beginning to emerge in volunteer tourism between NGOs and commercial operators. In many cases NGOs contract out to commercial



providers components of the volunteer tour product and limit their involvement to negotiating suitable projects where host communities need volunteer labour. Likewise, NGOs work directly with transnational developers towards outcomes that may not have total support from all factions of affected local communities. The argument could be made that as NGOs begin to develop partnerships with corporate entities, they run the risk of losing sight of their core activity of supporting local communities at all cost and instead become engaged in the gradual processes of the commodification of alternative – and by extension, volunteer – tourism.

However, this view of the commodification process underestimates local communities and the influential role they can play in maintaining the alternative frame of volunteer tourism. Wearing and McDonald (2002) demonstrate that communities do not passively accept top-down direction. Rather they assimilate 'knowledge' into day-to-day negotiations of the existing social order. Instead of simplistically relegating local communities to a 'dominated' position – a much accepted stereotype – it is crucial for volunteer tourism to turn the language of critique into a language of possibility in order to pay attention to the actualities of the everyday struggles of people (Fagan, 1999, p. 180).

Foucault's philosophies on power/knowledge, discourse, subjectivity and resistance have relevance here. His idea of 'disciplinary power' (Foucault, 1980, p. 105) allows us to explore some of the issues around developing tourism in these host communities. Foucault argues that power is exercised through concrete mechanisms and practices (Foucault, 1983); he explains: 'The problem is to both distinguish the events, differentiate the networks and levels to which they belong, and to reconstitute the threads which connect them and make them give rise to one another' (Foucault, 1979, p. 33). Adopting Foucault's advice would bring the two worlds of host community and volunteer together, which would further provide a new way of thinking, and would challenge the neocolonial approach to tourism where communities are exploited and seen as 'other'. In Foucault, people are never considered to be just victims. Although they are constrained by subjectivities, normative sexuality and 'docile bodies' constituted through powerful, normalizing discourses and self-surveillance, they are 'free' in the sense that even given this they can choose to resist. Foucault's idea of resistance allows for a more flexible and optimistic situation grounded in the everyday experiences of individuals; in this case, host community members.

## Conclusion

This introductory chapter has attempted to provide some foundational discussion that opens the way for detailed exploration of volunteer tourism through the following case studies. In this chapter we have outlined some broader debates about alternative tourism and the processes of power that underpin it. In order to elaborate how volunteer tourism has the ability to move beyond the simplistic oppression/emancipation dialectic, it is crucial for researchers engaging in examining volunteer tourism to steer away from the dichotomous

view that power is exercised by dominant players (tourism operators) over oppressed actors (destination communities), and instead adopt an alternative analytical framework that suggests emancipation is immanent in daily power struggles, rather than simply standing in opposition to oppression.

The remaining chapters in Part I of this book demonstrate this approach, and include contributions from researchers who consider the political dimensions of volunteer tourism in-depth and examine theoretical and applied manifestations of power, empowerment and equity as it plays out in a wide range of cultural contexts.

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#### Author Queries

[Au1] Cohen, 1974 is not cited in the text.

[Au2] Lyons, 2003 is not cited in the text.