Current Issues in Tourism, 2018
Vol. 21, No. 10, 1091–1096, https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1269727

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RESEARCH LETTER

Volunteer tourism motivations of the Marine Conservation Cambodia project

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(*Received 3 August 2015; accepted 5 December 2016*)

The current study explores what motivational factors contribute to 'gap year' volunteering as part of the Marine Conservation Cambodia programme. Results indicated that the top two motivations for currently volunteering were project-based (*marine conservation*) and new learning experiences (*understanding*). However, *career* and *social* factors were significant predictors of repeat experience in a marine conservation (MC) programme in their home country and overseas, indicating a sense of aspiring to 'make a difference' to the programme. Further understanding of this emerging factor will enable greater insight into the motives of MC volunteer tourists and aid in the worldwide conservation of fragile eco-systems.

Keywords: volunteering; tourism; Cambodia; career; gap year; volunteer functions inventory (VFI)

Introduction

Volunteering with internationally organized tourism programmes can be defined as *volunteer tourism*; 'who for various reasons volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society of environment' (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Volunteer tourism has experienced exponential growth in recent times and is predicted to continue (Wearing & McGehee, 2013), largely due to its popularity among young adults, many of whom are on 'gap years' (Yoda, 2010). Traditionally, the flow of volunteer tourists mainly consists of people travelling from relatively rich regions to aid poorer regions, such as Latin America, Asia and Africa, which account for almost 90% of volunteer tourism destinations available (Tourism Research & Marketing, 2008). The literature has generally viewed volunteer tourism favourably as a promising form of tourism that benefits the natural environment, participants, host communities and society in general (Alexander, 2012; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Pegg, Patterson, & Matsumoto, 2012). However, some critics believe that volunteer tourists' presence often does more harm than good, such as exploitation through unpaid labour, disruption of local economies' cycle of dependency and emphasizing power inequalities (Alexander, 2012; Deo, 2013; Pegg et al., 2012).

Of particular interest to the current study is the Marine Conservation Cambodia (MCC) project, located on Koh Rong Samloen in Cambodia, where volunteers aid in researching and protecting the marine environment of the project site. The purpose of the MCC

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programme is to help protect the endangered seahorses in the area. Volunteers are trained in diving, then progress to species identification and survey technique training. MCC does not receive sufficient funding to pay for such research to be conducted, nor does the local community have the expertise to undertake their fieldwork; therefore, volunteer tourists contribute to the future of the social fabric within the local community and the natural conservation world by helping to protect the endangered seahorse species – a major global benefit (Lo & Lee, 2011).

The most significant growth in the volunteer tourism sector has occurred since 1990 and largely due to the increased popularity in gap year travellers (Tourism Research & Marketing, 2008; Yoda, 2010). A gap year typically refers to the time period between school and higher education where an individual has delayed further education or employment, in order to travel, work or volunteer (Lyons et al., 2012). However, volunteer tourism programmes identify 18–30 years as the common age range, which may also encompass the career break gap year travellers. Therefore, for the purpose of the current research, gap year travellers were identified as 18–30 years old and include the 'school' and 'career' break gap year traveller.

Despite its age, Clary et al.'s (1998) volunteer functions inventory (VFI) is still used today to measure motivations for volunteering (Francis, 2011; Gage & Thapa, 2011; Jarvis & Blank, 2011) and is used in the current study as the foundation to the conceptual framework. Grimm and Needham (2012) define volunteer tourism motivations as 'internal or external reasons for visiting an area and participating in an activity at a given time' (p. 488), which can be multifaceted and interlaced (Soderman & Snead, 2008). The VFI includes six motives: *protective* (protecting the ego from negative features of the self and negative feelings), *values* (expressing or acting on important values, such as altruism and humanitarian concern for others), *career* (gaining or improving career prospects and experiences), *social* (strengthening or gaining social relationships), *understanding* (new learning experiences whether about the world, skills or abilities) and *enhancement* (personal growth, developing psychologically and ego boosting). Based on a review of initial qualitative interviews with marine conservation (MC) volunteers at MCC and the authors' previous experience in MC volunteer tourism, two additional factors were added to the conceptual framework: *host community*, which reflects the importance of supporting the local community and *MC*, which refers to a personal interest in volunteering in marine environments. This contribution to the VFI framework allows a better understanding of volunteer tourists, in particular, which has been rarely used (see Leonard & Onyx, 2009, for exception). The purpose of the current study is to explore: (1) what factors contribute to volunteering in the MCC programme, and (2) what factors predict the likelihood of volunteering in an MC programme, in their home country and overseas, in the next 12 months, three and five years?

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The sample ($N = 99$) comprised predominantly females (62%) between the age of 18 and 30 years. Thirty-one per cent of participants intended to commence higher education in the next six months, while 22% had recently completed a Bachelor degree, reflecting the traditional gap year cohort, which is consistent with Broad and Jenkins (2008). Thirty-six per cent indicated future career paths, which were relevant to the MCC programme, such as marine biology. The average income was reported as £14,882. A mix of nationalities from a variety of Western, European and Asian countries were identified, with the most

common nationalities being British (18%), American (17%) and Australian (12%), which is consistent with Lyons et al. (2012). Prior to volunteering in an MC programme, few participants had volunteered in an overseas capacity. Specifically, 72% had never volunteered in any MC programme overseas and 85 per cent had never volunteered in any MC programme in their home country, which can be rationalized due to the limited availability of such programmes in landlocked countries, such as Europe and states within the USA.

Using a snowball approach, participants ($N = 99$) volunteering in the MCC programme were invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire. The primary author travelled to and participated in the MCC programme, engaging in daily seahorse and reef surveys, cleaning beaches and English language lessons for locals in the host community. While joining a programme as a full participant could cause social discomfort (Tomazos & Butler, 2012), our observation indicated that because the researcher's age was consistent with the demographics and she contributed to the programme on par with fellow volunteer tourists, it may have actually improved the response rate. Previous researchers support the notion of researchers immersing themselves in the culture of a programme abroad (Grimm & Needham, 2012; Pan, 2012). The research project was approved by the institutions Human Research Ethics Committee.

Measures

Clary et al.'s (1998) modified VFI, consisting of 37 items (1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*) was used to measure motivations for volunteering in the MCC programme. Additional questions were included to determine volunteering habits before participating in the programme (e.g. prior to participating in the MCC programme, on average, how often did you volunteer in any MC programme in your home country or overseas?) and future intention to volunteer in an MC programme, in their home country and overseas (e.g. in the following durations (12 months, three and five years), how likely are you to volunteer again on an overseas MC programme?). Age, gender, income, nationality, current occupation, current education level and future intended occupation were included as demographic variables.

Results

Firstly, the top two reported means relating to individual's participation in MC tourism programmes were *MC* and *understanding* (Table 1). In addition, 33 participants responded to an open-ended question expanding on their reason/s for volunteering in MCC. The key reason was based around a sense of *purpose*, for example, because it's 'an amazing opportunity to experience this treasure first hand while simultaneously making a difference'. The second reason was specifically related to *diving*, for example, 'I love diving and it's important to give back in some way when diving internationally' and 'I joined this programme for its diving … and I think diving plays a huge role in people choosing this programme because of the vacation aspect'. Other reasons for selecting MCC was directly linked to their area of *study* (e.g., 'I'm studying Marine Biology and want hands-on experience while also travelling') or *career* (e.g., 'After several months of being a Dive Instructor, I began to help with the conservation and research aspect. I stayed because I fell in love with the area and community, believing in the need for conservation, research and protection of local seahorse species, and the ability to gain experience and begin a career in MC and research').

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, intercorrelations and reliabilities for key variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Enhancement	4.86	0.99	(.75)							
2. Values	5.74	0.84	.44**	(.73)						
3. Social	3.92	1.08	.36**	.24*	(.80)					
4. Protective	3.88	1.31	.70**	.32*	.27**	(.77)				
5. Career	4.85	1.24	.40**	.34**	.31**	.36**	(.80)			
6. Understanding	5.94	0.78	.41**	.55**	.04	.32**	.45**	(.75)		
7. Host community	5.65	0.99	.42**	.65**	.27**	.39**	.29**	.53**	(.77)	
8. Marine conservation	6.09	1.04	.21*	.68**	.09	.07	.40**	.45**	.53**	(.87)

Note: Reliability coefficients are shown on the diagonal in parentheses.*$p < .05$.** $p < .01$, $N = 99$.

Secondly, hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of the modified VFI to predict repeat experience to volunteer in an MC programme in their home country (Model 1) or overseas (Model 2). The total variance explained by Model 1 as a whole was 18.9%, F (8, 90) = 2.614, $p < .05$. *Career* ($\beta = .27$, $p < .05$) and *social* ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$) factors were statistically significant predictors of repeat experience in an MC programme in the next 12 months, while only *social* ($\beta = .28$, $p < .05$) predicted repeat experience in the next three years, and no significant predictors for the five-year timeframe. In contrast, the total variance explained by Model 2 as a whole was 15.3%, F (8, 90) = 2.036, $p < .05$. Only *career* ($\beta = .31$, $p < .05$) was a statistically significant predictor of repeat experience in an MC programme in the next 12 months, and partially consistent with Model 1, there were no significant predictors of repeat experience at the three- or five-year timeframes.

Discussion and conclusion

The current study explored the contributing factors to motivating volunteers in a MC programme in Cambodia, and the factors predicting repeat volunteering to an MC programme in their home country and overseas. Findings support current thinking within the volunteer tourism literature and contribute to better understanding project-specific factors for MC programmes. Developing a sense of understanding through new learning experiences and expressing important values (e.g., altruism and humanitarianism) were the highest reasons for volunteering in the MCC programme, replicating Jarvis and Blank (2011). However, it was a personal interest to conserve marine environments that was the strongest reason to volunteer, which is supported by Broad and Jenkins (2008) who argue that project-specific factors are a leading motivator for conservation-based volunteer tourism. Qualitative responses highlighted the desire for volunteers to make a difference in a context they were passionate about. More than just altruism or humanitarianism, these volunteers want to *see* their personal contribution making a difference. The importance of being able to dive at the location and as part of the programme was a tremendous motivating factor, not operationalized adequately in the questionnaire, but worthy of further attention. Furthermore, gap year volunteer tourists are more driven to volunteer in an MC programme in their home country, in the next three years, based on career and social factors, while volunteering in an overseas MC programme is driven by the career aspect but only in the next 12 months. Intuitively, this could be due to the gap year allowing ample time freedom, in which individuals are looking for ways to enhance their personal and professional experiences, which would make them appear more favourable to potential

employers. Financial implications would also be a valid constraint, which was not measured in the current study.

Results suggest that marketing campaigns should focus on gap year global learning experiences and fulfilling a sense of personal value (being part of making a difference), as well as emphasizing the unique contribution to scientific research and the conservation of marine eco-systems. Furthermore, volunteer tourists indicated their intention to return to MC programmes in the next 12 months, more so than three or five years; therefore, it would be advisable for volunteer tourism programmes to remain in contact with volunteers and offer incentives to return immediately after the programme. Returning volunteers are a particular asset with existing knowledge and training. In addition, there is a relatively short window of opportunity to volunteer before being inundated with work and family commitments. Having a greater insight into the motives of volunteer tourists in MC programmes can provide enormous benefit to the local host community, the fragile marine eco-systems, as well as the development of the volunteer tourists.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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