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The Development of Cross-Cultural (Mis)Understanding Through Volunteer Tourism

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Volunteer tourism is an increasingly popular activity in which individuals combine travel with voluntary work. On the whole, existing literature has provided an optimistic view of volunteer tourism, suggesting that it represents a more reciprocal form of tourism and facilitates the development of cross-cultural understanding among participants. However, more recently, it has been argued that if volunteer tourism programmes (VTPs) are not carefully managed, they may lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding and the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. Through conducting an Appreciative Inquiry into a number of volunteer programmes, this research sought to explore these ideas further and, in particular, identify the role that volunteer tourism sending organisations can play in order to ensure that cross-cultural understanding develops through volunteer tourism. The findings from this research suggest that the development of cross-cultural understanding should be perceived as a goal of volunteer tourism rather than a natural result of sending volunteers overseas. This paper argues that sending organisations can play an important role in facilitating the achievement of this goal through pro-active management prior, during, and after their VTPs.

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism combines travel with voluntary work, attracting individuals that 'are seeking a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and/or economic environments in which they participate' (Wearing, 2001: 1). Volunteer tourism is, therefore, seen to provide a more reciprocally beneficial form of travel in which both the volunteer and the host communities are able to gain from the experience. The concept of volunteer tourism has, therefore, come to be strongly related to concepts of sustainable tourism

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and sustainable development, especially with respect to pro-poor tourism (Hall, 2007; Rogerson, 2003; Singh, 2002) and ecotourism (Björk, 2000; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Cuthill, 2000; Ellis, 2003).

While the concept of international volunteering is by no means a new phenomenon (e.g. early examples include missionary movements), in recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of individuals taking part in short-term, organised volunteer tourism programmes (VTPs). The increasing demand for VTPs has been paralleled by an increase in sending organisations, which promote, sell and organise programmes for volunteer tourists. Sending organisations now offer a large variety of options depending on volunteer tourists' preferred activity, location and duration (see Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

It has been suggested that the interactions encouraged by this form of tourism between volunteers and their hosts lead to improved cross-cultural understanding with volunteer tourists gaining a sophisticated understanding of the local culture in which they participate, as well as of the issues facing their host communities (see Jones, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Wearing, 2001). Moreover, some group VTPs attract volunteers from all over the world and the friendships developed *between* volunteer tourists can also reduce racial, cultural and social boundaries (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003; Hustinx, 2001; McGehee & Santos, 2005; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; Wearing, 2001).

However, with the growing number of short-term VTPs, recent literature has begun to question whether volunteer tourism does indeed always result in increased cross-cultural understanding. In particular, literature relating to the UK gap year (a year taken out between high school and university, or post-university, which often includes an element of voluntary work) suggests that international volunteering may in fact reinforce existing stereotypes and deepen dichotomies of 'them and us' (Simpson, 2004; 2005b). Such arguments are also linked to the growing recognition within both academia (see Griffin, 2004; McBride *et al.*, 2006; Roberts, 2004; Simpson, 2005b) and the media (see Barkham, 2006; Brodie & Griffiths, 2006; Frean, 2006) that certain types of VTPs may represent a form of neo-colonialism or imperialism, in which volunteer tourists inadvertently reinforce the power inequalities between developed and developing countries, and even within such countries (McBride *et al.*, 2006). Most notably, when volunteer tourists inappropriately take on roles of 'expert' or 'teacher' regardless of their experience or qualifications, this can be seen to represent the neo-colonial construction of the westerner as racially and culturally superior.

This paper explores the ideal of developing cross-cultural understanding through volunteer tourism. It begins by summarising existing literature in this area to highlight the variety of opinions held on this topic. Subsequently, a recent study into a number of VTPs is presented. The methods employed in this study are briefly explained and this is followed by a synthesis of the key findings relating to this subject. Examples showing that volunteer tourism can either break or reinforce existing stereotypes are examined in order to explore the role that sending organisations can play in influencing the development of cross-cultural understanding.

Cross-Cultural (Mis)Understanding

Travel is often promoted as contributing to international understanding, tolerance and cultural awareness. Indeed, the International Institute for Peace Through Tourism (2006) suggests that by creating cultural dialogue, travel can reduce conflict. While the potential for such outcomes to occur through certain forms of travel remain questionable (Hall, 2005; Hottola, 2004), it has been argued that volunteer tourism provides an ideal opportunity to increase cross-cultural understanding (see Broad, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Clifton & Benson, 2006; Lewis, 2005; Wearing, 2001), and even develop a sense of global citizenship among participants (see Crabtree, 1998; McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Santos, 2005). These arguments are based on the view that the combining of voluntary work and travel provides greater opportunities for interaction and exchange between volunteer tourists and host communities.

In particular, Crabtree's (1998) study of volunteer tourists on a 'service-learning' programme in El Salvador and Nicaragua argues that volunteer tourism leads to 'global citizenry – interdependence and mutual responsibility' (Crabtree, 1998: 187). Crabtree's (1998) research also inadvertently provides an example of how volunteer tourism may represent a form of 'reconciliation tourism' (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003). A quote from an American volunteer tourist in El Salvador illustrates this:

> Cleaning up your own mess: I guess that's what we're doing here. Much of the situation here is, to some degree or another, our mess. That's part of the poetic justice. We're rebuilding a school that our tax dollars destroyed . . . It seems like the right thing to do (Volunteer journal excerpt, in Crabtree, 1998: 195).

Such arguments are also found within the industry itself, and several authors have underlined the way in which many sending organisations claim that their programmes are contributing to international understanding and peace. Brown and Morrison (2003: 75), for example, quote the president and CEO of Global Volunteers: 'Volunteer service engenders hope and friendship, both of which are critical to waging peace . . . The more people volunteer all over the world and make friends with local people, the more peaceful the world will be'. Similarly, Simpson (2005b: 191) highlights the sense of 'long-term social agenda' apparent in several gap year projects. Evidence of this underlying 'social agenda' can also be found with regard to the way in which certain sending organisations name and promote themselves. For example, United Planet's mission is 'to foster cross-cultural understanding and friendship, support communities in need, and promote social & economic prosperity among cultures in order to unite the world in a community beyond borders' (United Planet, 2007).

However, other literature, particularly relating to the UK gap year, challenges such views. Simpson (2004; 2005b) suggests that gap year sending organisations impose a simplistic view of 'the other' so that 'difference' can be sold and consumed. This occurs through the use of sweeping generalisations of destination communities in promotional materials and continues throughout the VTP due to a lack of critical engagement with the experience (Griffin, 2004; Simpson, 2005b). Consequently, it has been argued that working as a volunteer tourist

cannot be assumed to contribute to a deeper understanding of other cultures. Instead, volunteer tourism, as with other forms of tourism, can sometimes be used as an opportunity for people to confirm, rather than question, previously conceived ideas (Simpson, 2005b).

Volunteer tourism that takes place in developing countries may also not always generate a genuine awareness of the issues facing host communities. Simpson (2005b) argues that poverty is often trivialised in sending organisations' marketing, and subsequently, by volunteer tourists themselves. In many cases, volunteer tourists' previously formulated perceptions of poverty may be reinforced by their experiences if they are not encouraged to question the broader processes behind such issues. This can then lead to assumptions that host communities accept their poverty: 'They don't have TV's but it doesn't bother them because they don't expect one' (Interviewee, Simpson, 2005b: 213). Alternatively, some volunteer tourists may adopt a 'lotto logic' in which differences between countries are primarily attributed to 'luck' (Simpson, 2005b).

Such criticisms are based on the argument that it cannot be assumed that by merely facilitating contact with the 'other', this will lead to long-term international understanding and respect. Indeed, Griffin (2004: 70) argues that 'the assumption that "seeing" equates to "knowing" means stereotypes in the mind of the observer could perhaps be strengthened rather than challenged'.

This research sought to examine these issues further by exploring the role that sending organisations play in the level of international understanding that develops through volunteer tourism. While it is recognised that volunteer tourism often occurs without such organisations, the focus was specifically on VTPs offered by these organisations as they have been the most criticised in recent literature (e.g. Roberts, 2004; Simpson, 2005b). To achieve this, ten case studies were involved in an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into good practice in volunteer tourism. The research, therefore, looked at a range of issues surrounding volunteer tourism, but this paper focuses specifically on the theme of cross-cultural understanding.

Appreciative Inquiry

It is difficult to provide an objective and accurate definition of AI because it has been approached in a number of different ways and can be understood as a theory, a process, a field of knowledge, a worldview or a philosophy (Grant & Humphries, 2006; van der Haar, 2002). However, Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005: 8) description of AI provides a basic, practice-oriented definition:

> Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organisation or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms.

AI emerged as a social constructionist reaction to the shortcomings of conventional action research (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Action research is often criticised for underestimating the power of theory, focusing too much on problem solving and using logical positivistic assumptions. In comparison,

AI claims to move towards a more theoretical, appreciative and socio-rationalist approach (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

Ten case studies of sending organisations were involved in this research: AVIVA, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Conservation Volunteers Australia, Earthwatch Institute, Foundation for Sustainable Development, Global Volunteer Network, International Student Volunteers, South America Connections, Voluntours South Africa and Worldwide Experience. These case studies were selected to represent the variety of sending organisations offering short-term VTPs (see Callanan & Thomas, 2005). The sending organisations research, therefore, included both non-profit organisations as well as commercially run businesses. Furthermore, while some sending organisations involved in this study are based in the country in which they operate their VTPs, others are multi-national organisations (with headquarters in one country but running VTPs in multiple countries worldwide). The types of programmes offered by the organisations also vary from two-week group projects to longer term individual placements with a minimum duration of three months. Programmes were researched both in developing and developed countries.

An AI typically involves four stages (Ludema *et al.*, 2006): discovery (appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is'), dream (envisioning 'what might be'), design (dialoguing and co-constructing 'what should be') and destiny (innovating and sustaining 'what will be'). Stages one and two were addressed through conducting interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes with representatives of each sending organisation involved in this research. One representative (a volunteer coordinator or director) from each sending organisation was interviewed so that a total of 10 interviews were conducted. In addition, representatives of the host organisations were interviewed – this was not possible for all sending organisations, but a total of eight representatives of host organisations were interviewed.

Focus groups lasting between 30 and 60 minutes were also conducted with the volunteer tourists in order to access a range of opinions and experiences, and assess the degree of consensus on certain issues (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Where there were not enough volunteers at a project to conduct a focus group, individual interviews were carried out. A total of seven focus groups and seven individual interviews were conducted with volunteers.

All interviews and focus groups focused on accessing what was working well within the sending organisations and VTPs by using unconditionally positive questions: 'It all begins with the unconditional positive question that guides inquiry agendas and focuses attention towards the most life-giving, life-sustaining aspects of organisational existence' (Ludema *et al.*, 2006: 156). While problems and challenges still arose in interviews, the focus was to approach such issues in a more constructive and positive manner.

The third stage (design) involved the development of an online forum (blog), in which all the participants from the research were invited to comment on the preliminary findings. The decision to use this method of data collection was based on the fact that by using interviews and focus groups at the site of each VTP, this had not allowed for dialogue between different participants. If a framework of good practice was to be developed, which would be valuable

to the variety of sending organisations that operate, it was seen to be essential to encourage discussion during the design phase of this AI. Unfortunately, although many participants viewed the 'blog' and several individuals sent emails to the researcher to voice their support, only a few left comments on the online forum itself. This suggests that whereas the use of online forums can provide a valuable way of sharing findings with participants, it is not necessarily an appropriate data collection method. Having said this, for other types of research, where participants have requested the research or have more time to spend online, the use of online forums could perhaps be more worthwhile. The final stage (destiny) was essentially beyond the scope of this research, although the results were sent to participants in order to communicate stories and share good practices. These stages are summarised in Table 1.

Data analysis was approached as a process which started simultaneously with field work. This continuous approach to data analysis or 'meaning-making' is an important characteristic of AI (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Data were first analysed on a fairly informal basis throughout fieldwork with the objective of adapting interview questions and becoming familiar with the data. Second, the main phase of data analysis involved an in-depth analysis of interview and focus group transcripts from each of the case studies used in the discovery and dream phases of AI. Themes were extracted from the data and tabulated in such a way that each was linked with as many relevant quotes as possible. Third, data from the online forum conducted in the design phase were used to refine and complete the analysis.

Breaking or Reinforcing Cultural Stereotypes?

The ideal that volunteer tourism can lead to cross-cultural understanding repeatedly arose in interviews and focus groups with volunteer tourists, sending organisations and host organisations. This was seen to occur in two key ways. First, through their interaction with local people and other volunteers (of different nationality), volunteer tourists perceived themselves as offering a challenge to their national stereotypes:

> I think a really big thing is the positive image of North Americans they are bringing. With the locals and with the school kids who just have a really narrow view of the US and they're really helping to break those stereotypes and share some of their culture (Team Leader).

This opinion was attributed, in part, to the interaction and exchange which occurred between local people and the volunteer tourists and also to the act of volunteer tourism itself. In several cases, it was implied by sending organisations that their volunteers were naturally perceived as 'good' people because they had travelled long distances to volunteer in a community. Such views are parallel to the research conducted by Stoddart and Rogerson (2004), which suggests that some volunteer tourists consider this form of tourism as a means to improve race relations. Interestingly, these authors and this study both point to the importance that Americans in particular attribute to this opportunity, due to the current image of their country in many parts of the world.

Table 1 Outline of inquiry strategy

Stage	*Steps*	*Purpose*
DISCOVERY (appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is') AND DREAM (envisioning 'what could be')	a) Contact sending organisations and invite their participation. b) Observe the positive aspects of volunteer tourism programmes by focusing on what they are visibly achieving and how they are doing this (discovery). c) Conduct interviews with representatives of sending organisations and host organisations. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideals and aspirations for the future (dream). d) Conduct focus groups with volunteer tourists. Explore what is effective and successful in current practices (discovery) and discuss ideals and aspirations for the future (dream)	- Reinforce existing positive imagery and develop positive visions by focusing on the benefits and successful management strategies of each organisation. - Bring together characteristics of successful management from each organisation so that a preliminary framework of good practice for sending organisations can be developed.
DESIGN (co-constructing 'what should be')	e) Encourage comment and discussion between participants from the discovery and dream stages by placing the preliminary framework of good practice in an online forum (blog). f) Revise and adapt framework of good practice based on comments made in the forum.	- Encourage dialogue between different sending organisations with similar goals. Allow them to find common ground by sharing ideals and empower them to adopt positive ideas from each other. - Develop revised framework of good practice which represent shared ideas.
DESTINY (sustaining 'what will be')	g) Essentially beyond the scope of this study although final results were sent to each sending organisation.	Communicate stories and good practices to encourage organisations to adopt some of these ideas.

However, despite such perceptions, this research suggests that even where cross-cultural appreciation does occur at an individual level, this does not necessarily lead to changes in broader perceptions of nationalities or cultures. Several interviewees implied that the positive relationships they had developed with individuals from different countries were simply 'exceptions to the rule'. For example, by claiming that American volunteer tourists are 'not your normal American tourist' (Repeat volunteer), previously held ideas and stereotypes associated with the 'normal' American were maintained. Although this concept has not been directly discussed in literature regarding volunteer tourism, it supports research relating to work and study exchanges. Richards (2006) suggests

that while such experiences do lead to increased cultural tolerance, more deeply embedded attitudes are less likely to be affected.

A second recurring theme among volunteer tourists was that they believed they had gained a far greater and more 'real' understanding of the host country than they could have through conventional forms of tourism. While it was beyond the scope of this study to look into whether this perceived deep appreciation for the host culture was in fact a reality, this was one of the key points made by volunteers when they were asked to compare themselves to 'tourists'. In particular, several volunteer tourists stated that they had formed lasting friendships with members of the host communities or that their volunteering experience might affect the development of future friendships back home. For example, one volunteer that had recently returned from a VTP in Argentina claimed that:

> I really have felt very strongly since I've been back that I want to stay connected in any way I can with anything that has anything to do with Latin America . . . there's a very large Latin America population here [in San Francisco] . . . and I want to mingle with that. I want to speak Spanish, I want to have friends in that community and I want to find some opportunities to volunteer in that community here (Returned volunteer).

Although the majority of volunteer tourists believed they had learnt about the host community's cultures, the extent of this varied considerably, depending on the individual and the type of VTP in which they were involved. For example, one volunteer who had been volunteering in Argentina for three months and living with a host family felt that she had been able to integrate into the host community:

> I can speak, I have friends here, Argentine friends that text message me every day and I'm just starting to feel like I'm in a place where I can integrate myself into the community rather than being like 'the American' (Volunteer, Argentina).

In comparison, volunteer tourists involved in a two-week group VTP did not claim to have developed close relationships with local people. While the majority of such volunteers enjoyed the chance to meet local people, these 'interactions' were usually perceived as providing memories, rather than lasting friendships:

> You know I've had occasions when little Indian kids in Mexico had never seen anyone with blue eyes before and they thought that was a real giggle. And last year I was in Kenya and they'd never seen anyone with white hair and I had all these kids patting and feeling it. So you get all these little experiences which are really quite memorable (Repeat volunteer).

The present study also builds on Simpson's (2005b) research, which points to the way in which volunteer tourism can potentially reinforce, rather than reduce, stereotypes. Furthermore, the following quote supports Simpson's (2005b) argument that volunteer tourism can result in the development of 'lotto logic' among participants: 'We've seen like some of the kids and stuff and how they live and it just kind of makes you appreciate how lucky we are at Christmas and

stuff' (Volunteer, South Africa). This research does not wish to underestimate the value of learning to appreciate one's 'luck' and suggests that for some volunteer tourists this symbolises an important step away from taking their wealth for granted, towards realising the realities in which many people live. The key issue, however, arises when volunteer tourists' stereotypes are reinforced, or when they assume that local people accept their poverty:

> If you were going to live down there, you'd have to stay with the family and if someone knew there was a white person staying in that area, they could just break in and do horrible things (Volunteer, South Africa).

> They don't know any better and they haven't had what we have so to them that's quite normal and they're quite happy being like that (Volunteer, South Africa).

This research, therefore, proposes that while cross-cultural understanding has the potential to develop through volunteer tourism, it cannot be assumed to be an automatic outcome of an individual's participation in a VTP. Instead, it is argued that the development of cultural appreciation and understanding should be approached as a goal of volunteer tourism. Significantly, this study suggests that sending organisations can play a central role in facilitating the achievement of such an objective.

The Role of Sending Organisations

While the responsibility of developing cross-cultural understanding cannot be solely attributed to the sending organisation, this research suggests that through careful planning and management, these organisations can have an influence at a number of stages. While many issues arose from this research, three key recommendations can be made for sending organisations seeking to improve race relations through their programmes.

First, sending organisations need to carefully consider the type of work in which their volunteer tourists should be involved in when they develop their programmes:

> It's about getting the volunteers to fit in and match their skills with the needs of the community rather than just as some companies do, getting the volunteers and then dumping them on a project (Director of sending organisation).

The importance of finding appropriate work is particularly significant when considering arguments that claim that certain VTPs may represent a form of neo-colonialism in which participants use developing countries as 'training grounds' for future professionals (Roberts, 2004: 46). In order to move away from such criticism, it is, therefore, essential that volunteers are appropriately qualified and prepared so that they are perceived positively by their hosts and can make a genuine contribution, rather than simply absorb time and resources.

In addition, this research highlighted the importance of developing programmes with local people so that volunteers are involved in work that does not undermine the value of local staff. This supports existing work by Ellis

(2003) suggesting that some people may associate rising levels of volunteering with employment losses. This was recognised by one host organisation which suggested that volunteer tourists could potentially replace local employees if programmes were not carefully managed:

> I do want to emphasise that we do take care not undercutting the market price . . . So you can see how when they [the volunteers] come in I can involve them in the planting side of it . . . and in the mean time of course I've got contractors coming in behind and doing the maintenance. So it means everyone's getting a piece of the action but the whole process is happening perhaps twice the rate to what it would have otherwise happened at (Representative of host organisation).

Clearly, this is important not only for ethical reasons but also to ensure that positive relationships develop between volunteer tourists and the host organisations with which they are working. In addition, it is essential that host organisations are in control of the programme to ensure that projects are not inappropriately imposed on host communities. This will also help to ensure that an environment of shared power and purpose develops between 'host' and 'guest'.

Second, this research supports existing work relating to the importance of experiential learning and the inaccuracy of assuming that contact with the 'other' will automatically result in a broadening of horizons and a greater understanding of host communities (e.g. Crabtree, 1998; Griffin, 2004; IVPA, 2007; Jones, 2005; Simpson, 2005a,b). The sending organisations involved in this research used a range of different techniques to encourage reflection amongst their participants. These included encouraging volunteers to keep a journal so that they would reflect during their VTP (through writing) and after their VTP (through reading). In addition, some sending organisations had written requirements such as applications, essays and/or evaluations. In several group VTPs, group discussions were conducted to explore broader issues surrounding the project and role plays were carried out to encourage volunteers to identify with local people.

Third, sending organisation should recognise that if cross-cultural understanding is to develop, their volunteers need to be exposed to other cultures. This can occur in two key ways: through having a group of volunteers of a variety of nationalities and backgrounds and/or through creating opportunities for volunteers to interact with members of the host communities.

Existing work argues that group VTPs can lead to cross-cultural understanding through the relationships developed *between* volunteer tourists (e.g. Hustinx, 2001; McGehee & Santos, 2005; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006; Wearing, 2001). However, while this occurred in some of the case studies involved in this research, the majority of participants were primarily from Europe, the United States and Australasia, therefore, potentially reducing the exposure to other cultural ways of doing. Moreover, certain sending organisations cater primarily for one or two nationalities and attract similar types of people to their programmes. Notably, one programme involved in this research catered almost exclusively to British gap year students and, in an informal conversation, one volunteer tourist admitted that she felt as though she was 'back in boarding

school' because she was living and working with volunteers of the same nationality, age and background. This suggests that sending organisations may need to deliberately market their programmes to a variety of nationalities.

In addition, volunteers and members of host communities should be provided with opportunities for interaction and exchange. While this occurs naturally to some extent through volunteers' work, several sending organisations involved in this research highlighted the importance of deliberately creating opportunities for exchange between volunteers and their hosts. This research points to a number of options for facilitating interaction between local people and volunteer tourists. One opportunity involves placing volunteer tourists in host families in order to enable greater immersion into the local community. In some cases, living with a host family was not only seen as a means to integrate into the culture, but also as an important part of the challenge of the volunteering experience. In the case of one programme especially, the fact that their volunteers lived with local families was perceived as an essential component of the programme:

> People staying in a pension or a hotel or a youth hostel with other kids, they're not integrated into society, they're not really understanding the culture on a different level . . . Living with these families . . . you can't replace that with anything else . . . I think it's quintessential because also those kids living in that environment see the reality of people that they also grow to care about and . . . it's a source of motivation for a lot of them also to really work hard and make a difference (Programme coordinator).

In addition, interaction can be facilitated where volunteer tourists work alongside local volunteers. However, although this is valued by volunteer tourists, developing such a programme presents a number of challenges. Whereas volunteers both in developed and developing countries generally only work part-time (Anheier & Salamon, 1999), volunteer tourists, for the most part, work full time. As a result, it can be difficult to find local people who are able to take part in a full-time programme. For example, while one organisations' weekday projects involve both local and international volunteers, it is much more difficult to find local volunteers who can participate on longer 'residential' projects:

> Ideally I think we would like them to work alongside Australian volunteers more but . . . the only Australians who can do that are people who are unemployed or perhaps students during school holidays. So for a lot of the time there are not a lot of Australian volunteers on projects, maybe some retirees (Representative of sending organisation).

A further option for facilitating interaction between volunteers and local people is to create social occasions in which both volunteers and local people participate. For example, on the final day of one volunteer programme, hosts and volunteers were both involved in culturally representative performances that included singing, dancing and story telling. Through such activities, this programme was able to move away from the typical forms of cultural consumption associated with conventional tourism to an exchange model based on mutual cultural appreciation.

Concluding Comments

Volunteer tourism potentially provides the opportunity to develop cross-cultural understanding and a sense of global citizenry among participants. In some cases, it may even reflect the ideals of 'peace through tourism' (Brown & Morrison, 2003) or 'reconciliation tourism' (Crabtree, 1998). It could, therefore, be assumed that the increasing popularity of volunteer tourism should be celebrated as providing a shift towards more responsible forms of travel.

This research has shown that, in many cases, volunteer tourism does have the potential to fulfil such ideals. However, existing literature (McBride *et al.*, 2006; Roberts, 2004; Simpson, 2005b), as well as this study, has shown that it cannot be assumed that cross-cultural understanding automatically results from sending individuals to participate in VTPs. While this does not mean that volunteer tourism is without value for the volunteers and the communities they visit, it does suggest that it is essential for programmes to be carefully developed and managed. Where individuals volunteer through sending organisations, these organisations can play an important role in ensuring that stereotypes are broken rather than reinforced.

This research has highlighted three key recommendations for sending organisations seeking to achieve cross-cultural understanding. First, they should develop programmes which will be of genuine value for the local communities. Second, the importance of approaching VTPs as a learning process rather than simply an 'experience' should be recognised through the use of experiential learning techniques. Third, opportunities for interaction with other cultures should be deliberately facilitated.

This study also points to a number of areas for future research. It is suggested that research involving host communities could provide a valuable avenue to further explore the view that local people involved with volunteer tourists develop their cross-cultural understanding. In addition, the factors influencing cross-cultural understanding need to be examined in greater detail, including the role that sending organisations can play in facilitating this and also the relationship of volunteer tourism to the broader research literature with respect to volunteerism (e.g. Clary & Snyder, 1999; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998) and intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000). It is hoped that continued research into this topic will contribute to the development of volunteer tourism as a unique form of tourism that facilitates positive international understanding and solidarity.

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