Conclusion: Why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?

Dr Angela M Benson
University of Brighton

Purpose – This paper summarises the contributions made in this special issue and draws conclusions about the issue's key question "Why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?", providing the eighth and concluding article in the collection.

Design/methodology/approach – This article summarises and critically reviews the seven articles that have contributed to the themed issue.

Findings –International volunteer tourism is a growing phenomenon that has received much criticism in the last decade and whilst there are a number of mechanisms to improve the quality of this sector as yet, there is little evidence to support any conclusion that there is wide-scale success in achieving best practice in quality assurance within the sector.

Originality/value – This themed issue explores international volunteer tourism from a range of contributors, academics, a practitioner and a travel writer, who have engaged with a range of stakeholders to offer different perspectives. The themed issue as a whole offers the reader an opportunity to engage in a unique and wide ranging discourse on quality and international volunteer tourism.

Keywords – International volunteer tourism, voluntourism, quality, best practice,

Introduction

This article will summarise and draw conclusions from the contents of seven articles in this Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism themed issue considering "Why and how should the international volunteer tourism experience be improved?" It is the eighth and concluding article in the collection and, as such, it will examine each of the other articles in sequence, drawing out the most salient contributions, before synthesizing some unifying conclusions and finally, considering further research ideas that would address outstanding questions to shed further light on the field.

Is certification the answer to creating a more sustainable volunteer tourism sector?

After the introduction Rattan, in the first article, provides a critical review of the literature on tourism ecolables and certification schemes in tourism. She then turns her attention to a discussion of the extent to which certification provides a viable option for the international volunteer tourism sector. Whilst Rattan sets the scene by the examining 'the good, the bad and the reality' of volunteer tourism and therefore, addresses the 'why' of the themed issues' question, more importantly, the article examines a potential 'how'. There is no doubt that, currently, certification is one of the key mechanisms being used by the industry

in order to persuade the sector to move to higher quality projects/products. However, as Rattan points out, there is no evidence to suggest that certification has produced any clear examples where certification has been instrumental in changing practice in the international volunteer tourism sector (either in tourism in general or more specifically in ecotourism). Rattan also points out that when considering certification schemes the costs and who pays them can be a significant barrier, particularly considering that many of the volunteer tourism organisations are small to medium size enterprises. The additional cost of independent certification means that there must be a commercial imperative for any business in which there is a measurable commercial gain from the investment. This is particularly pressing given that the developed world, in which the providers are mainly based, is just coming out of a world economic crisis, and the costs may be prohibitive. A model of reflective self-assessment may be more appropriate if the goal is to improve / change current standards. Rattan also cautions that a certification scheme that is 'theoretically dense' may not be supported, contending that one with 'real world' value and applicability is more likely to be adopted successfully.

Elephants, Orphans and HIV/ AIDS: examining the voluntourist experiences in Botswana

Phelan provides a voice for volunteers that have engaged in one of three different projects based in Botswana, reporting findings that suggest five emergent themes: the difficulty of finding volunteer opportunities in Botswana; the high cost of 'free' labour; the ownership status of the organisations; the extent to which volunteers impacted locally and; the authenticity of the social and cultural interactions between volunteers and community. The third and fourth themes were heavily linked to the volunteers' perspective on the payment they make and the ways in which this links to their concept of volunteer enterprises. Whilst it is generally acknowledged in the literature that volunteering in an international tourism context is associated with a payment (just like any other holiday type product) there is actually very little research that discusses this phenomena in any meaningful way. The findings in this paper generally reinforce what is currently articulated in the literature about the problems surrounding volunteer tourism. The one that stands out is the difficulty volunteers have had in finding a volunteer project in Botswana that suits them. What needs to be considered here is that volunteer tourism is still predominantly a business transaction based on supply / demand mechanisms in that organisations set up projects that they believe will 'sell' to volunteers.

A further point that needs to be considered with this article is that, whilst the voice of the community is evident, it is only heard through the interviews held with volunteers and therefore, it is unclear to what extent the community's views actually mirror these perceptions. The voice of the volunteer is still the dominant voice in the literature and whilst there is a growing literature based on findings from a community point of view these are still relatively minimal when you consider the size and scale of the projects on offer worldwide.

Online portrayals of volunteer tourism in Nepal: exploring the communicated disparities between promotional and user-generated content

Like Phelan, Easton and Wise use the volunteer voice in this article. They have collected volunteer data sets from TripAdvisor Forum threads and, in addition, they examined organisational websites to see how the organisations promote volunteer experiences. By evaluating these two different stakeholder groups they seek to address a gap in our understanding of how user-generated content either reinforces or challenges the commercial promotion of volunteer tourism, using case material on Nepal. They suggest that volunteer tourism websites present a positive view of volunteering based around four key themes: personal development; career development; travel experience and cultural education. Unsurprisingly, they found that predominantly negative aspects were absent from the promotional websites, which contrasts to the findings from the TripAdviser forum, where negative implications were often highlighted. These negative implications included aspects related to local communities but once again these were from the volunteer perspective and not the local community (similar to Phelan above). In summary, Easton and Wise believe that social media have the potential to shape the future of volunteer tourism organisations and cannot be ignored. Furthermore, they call for more research on the impact of user-generated content and the extent to which it is causing organisations to change their practices.

User-generated content (often characterized as Citizen Media) has been on the increase for the last decade. However, whilst this article by Easton and Wise demonstrates that volunteers are using this medium after their volunteer experience, it is less clear the extent to which volunteers engage in reading user-generated content prior to booking their projects and therefore, the extent to which organisations that are received negatively are already losing customers. There is no doubt that social media platforms are moving the power from organisations to the consumers (volunteers), who if they decide to 'vote with their feet' have the potential to put the worst of the organisations out of business.

Marketing and communication of responsibility in volunteer tourism

The next article by Smith and Font also used web-based data sets, however, their focus was solely on the marketing pages of volunteer organisations, which they mapped to Responsible Voluntourism criteria. What is particularly interesting about this article is that it is a follow up study to previous research (collected in 2012 and published as Smith and Font, 2014) and as such, the article evaluates the extent to which the volunteer tourism organisations have changed their behaviour to address feedback on the organisation's product offers. The article outlines the changes between the original data set and this paper's findings. They report mixed results indicating that 'greenwashing' is still visible and even responsible practices are still communicated inconsistently by organisations to their stakeholders. However, the authors do also contend that they see a general market improvement by most of the organisations, with organisations moving away from a mass market to finding market niches, which they believe indicates a professionalising of the sector. What is important here in terms of the 'how' of the strategic question of the themed issue is that they believe that volunteer organisations may be prepared to learn and change as a result of such feedback, meaning that providing consistent methods for volunteers to offer such feedback has the potential to encourage improvements in the quality of the products.

Wildlife and conservation volunteering: the issues of trying to solve the riddle of which is the best wildlife and conservation organisation to volunteer with

Travel writer Peter Lynch demonstrated an interesting and thought provoking perspective in the talk he gave at the ESRC Festival of Social Science event in 2013 which he has used as the basis in a similarly fascinating piece for this special themed issue. The article is based on Lynch's journey from trying to find a volunteer project to actually volunteering and consequently to developing an audit tool based on nine core criteria that provide a framework to assess volunteer tourism organisations. Lynch then used the audit criteria in a book assessing 53 organisations whose focus was related to wildlife and conservation. There are two aspects that are particularly pertinent in this article, one linked to the 'why' and the other 'the how'. The 'why' is related to Lynch's initial research when trying to find a volunteering project where he found the social media and websites full of 'emotive images', 'weasel words' 'hyperbole' 'feel good factor' and 'disgruntled and disappointed volunteer' comments (further supporting the articles of Easton and Wise, and Smith and Font). The other aspect – the 'how' - is the 'unintended consequence' of Lynch's book once pubished, in that organisations that had not scored well contacted Lynch believing that his assessment had been too harsh. Further discussions between Lynch and individual organisations led to them actually wanting to know what changes they needed to make in order to score more highly prior to publication of the subsequent book. This viewpoint reinforces some aspects of the findings by Easton and Wise and in the Smith and Font article as well as mirroring some others. One final comment regarding Lynch's viewpoint is that, when examining the results in his book some organisations score highly on some criteria and not on others but even the better organisations do not score uniformly highly across the board, and therefore, it is clear that whilst small wins might be being achieved within wildlife and conservation volunteering organisations, there is some distance still to travel.

A clash with volunteer tourists? An extreme case study in Guatemala

This article by Klaver examines three different projects that are all child-related (orphanage, street children and a school) and are examined through a range of stakeholder voices. This is the only academic paper in this special issue that explicitly includes local communities' voices. The focus of this article is to examine value change and the extent to which cultural clashes may occur between highly individualist volunteers and collectivist Guatemalans. Klaver describes how collaboration between the different cultures was not a problem, and suggests that, rather than "value change", the term 'awareness change' would be more appropriate. An interesting aside to his research was the issue around 'hidden fact' that challenge the project in terms of transparency, legitimacy, quality and long term sustainability. Eason and Wise also highlighted in their article that corruption and deceit associated with organisations was evident when they examined the volunteer threads on TripAdvisor Forums. This issue in particular raises significant concerns when trying to examine the strategic question of this special issue. Whilst it can clearly be identified as a reason why the international volunteer tourism sector needs to be improved, corruption or deceit become increasingly problematic when trying to achieve the 'how' of addressing this. This is not about a lack of knowledge or understanding on the part of an organisation in that an audit type mechanism or research-related feedback could underpin a potential change of

practice. The example in this paper is about deceit, even if at best, the organisation believes they are doing it for the greater good and therefore, needs to be addressed if this sector is to achieve best practice. Klaver calls for more research on this topic but, this raises issues of methodology and ethical considerations.

Finding the win-win: providing supportive and enriching volunteer experiences while promoting sustainable social change

The article by Wilson is particularly timely given the growing debates in relation to child-related volunteering projects. Including a viewpoint from a social worker involved with both children and international volunteers is a welcome addition to this special issue. What becomes evident from the article is the need for a wider discourse that is multidisciplinary in approach and engages in literatures beyond tourism drawn from, for example, childhood studies and development studies. The focus of Wilson's viewpoint is to examine the complexities around volunteering on projects that involve children. In particular, Wilson looks at why it is important to consider child protection and why projects fail to meet adequate standards. The aspect of this article that provides the strongest evidence for this point of view is that Wilson describes attending a conference where none of the 13 organisations attending had a child protection policy. She then elaborates about the experience of giving a training session, directing organisations to an online resource pack and sharing her own organisation's child protection policy.   Despite this, when following up on the exercise six months later, of the 22 organisations contacted ***none*** had a child protection policy. When reading this, the saying that "you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink" comes to mind. Furthermore, unlike the Smith and Font research feedback which had succeeded in instigated some change and the book published by Lynch which also generated reflection and change by some organisations, the 'how' of trying to engage with, and improve the practise of, the NGO network in this paper was unsuccessful. Wilson then offers the working practices of her organisation in order to demonstrate that there is a way to integrate a voluntourism aspect.

Whilst this special issue did not set out to have a particular focus on orphanages and child related volunteer placements, it is evident that this phenomenon is very topical and is addressed in four of the seven article (Phelan, Eason and Wise, Klaver and Wilson). Furthermore, the rhetoric around orphanages and child-related projects is confusing and often contradictory. Recent reports by Richer and Norman (2010); by the United Nations Children's Fund (2011) and even details of the latest report by Next Generation Nepal (NGN) 2014 entitled *The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering: Combating Child Trafficking through Ethical Voluntourism*[i] which arrived by email during the writing of this conclusion, all of which indicate a number of issues around volunteers working with child-related projects and none are supportive of such initiatives. Furthermore Tourism Concern, a UK campaigning organisation for tourism, on their website has an emotive picture of a young male child holding a sign saying "I am not for sale"[ii] and clearly are in agreement with these latest reports. On the other hand, as might be expected, organisations are defensive (see Slowe, 2010; Benson and Wearing, 2012) about their projects and the role they believe they fulfil. Responsibletourism.com have taken a decision to promote only those volunteer projects from partner organisations that commit to the following promises, as outlined in

the *Guidelines for Partner Operators: Volunteering Directly with Vulnerable Children*[iii] . These include principles such as "volunteers must be qualified", "must be DBS checked", "volunteer for no less than 4 weeks", etc., and "to work to UNICEF recommended levels", which was also indicated in the Wilson paper when discussing her own organisation.

Concluding remarks

It was a pleasure to put together this special themed issue that offers diversity in a number of ways. It presents both research and viewpoint papers written by academics, a practitioner and a travel writer and therefore, is theoretically rich, practically applied and empirically grounded. Many of these articles offer perspectives of international projects taking place in developing countries with case study data collected from around the globe: Botswana (article 2); Nepal (article 3); Guatemala (article 6) and Peru (article 7) which examine a range of projects: wildlife and conservation (articles 2, 5); orphanages and child-related (articles 2, 6 and 7); and health-related (article 2).

Furthermore, in these studies, the authors examine the underlying and current criticisms of the international volunteer tourism sector from a range of stakeholder viewpoints and in particular, as you would expect, highlight issues that are pertinent and underpin the essence of the individual article. However, there are a number of common threads that run across the articles as they examine the 'why' of the strategic question, drawing on a range of available sources - a growing academic literature, numerous media articles, popular volunteer travel books and social networking tools. The more challenging part of the issues question is the 'how' and the extent to which mechanisms are, or could be, put in place in order to change the status quo and move the international volunteer tourism sector to a position of meeting best practice and therefore, potentially sustainable for all stakeholders.

Where to from here

Whilst there is a range of stakeholders discussed within the contents of the special issue, it must be recognised that there are several voices that are either minimal or not heard, in essence those of the community, where volunteer projects are often located and that of the national governments. In order to engage in debate about the quality of volunteer tourism opportunities and the extent to which best practice can be achieved, it is necessary that all primary stakeholder voices are heard. Therefore, once again, (see Benson 2011) I call for further research to be conducted on under researched stakeholder groups.

Furthermore, whilst these papers and the extant literature on volunteer tourism engage in the discourses that clearly articulate knowledge and understanding of the 'why' the sector should be improved, there is still much work to do on the 'how' do we get there. I therefore, call for papers that examine quality mechanisms and the extent to which they move organisations towards a continuum of best practice.

We (the theme editor, along with colleagues from the Universities of Kent and Strathclyde)

were recently successful in securing an Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) funded seminar series (2015 – 2016). Whilst the seminar series is designed to broaden discussions on a number of topics linked to 'Reconceptualising International Volunteering', Seminar number 5 (Spring 2016, to be held at University of Kent, Canterbury Campus) has been specifically designed to continue the discussions around quality and is entitled *"Evaluation of quality initiatives in International Volunteering".* The seminar is in response to the growing number of quality-related issues surrounding international volunteering – example: in a recent discussion with Volunteering England they indicated that they were now receiving calls from international volunteers who were concerned about their poor overseas experience. Volunteering England indicated that they log these calls but do not have the capacity or remit to deal with the issues. Consequently, this seminar will build on and further develop from the 'Pursuing Quality in International Volunteering' workshop (held in Brighton 2013), that was also funded by the ESRC (through the Festival of Social Science programme) and this special themed issue, which was one of the results of the 2013 event.

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[ii] http://tourismconcern.org.uk/category/campaign-actions/
[iii] http://www.responsibletravel.com/holidays/volunteer-travel/travel-guide/volunteering-vulnerable-children-guidelines