

Conceptualising the Nature of Learning in Volunteer Tourism.

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism is an increasingly popular and commercialised holiday experience that blends the activities of tourism and volunteering. While on holiday either domestically or abroad some individuals choose to volunteer their time, money and effort to a cause or project. Volunteer tourism projects vary widely in their focus, duration and cost but are often perceived and marketed as opportunities to learn and truly engage with the host community and gain both personal and professional benefits. This study recasts these experiences in the specific context of learning, offering an interpretation of volunteer tourism as an informal learning experience where active, free-choice and experiential learning opportunities may arise through social and physical interactions with the local community, other volunteer tourists and the natural environment. With a specific focus on questioning what and how individuals learn through volunteer tourism, this research aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of contemporary volunteer tourism experiences that recognises the complex and multifaceted nature of learning and volunteer tourism.

Semi-structured interviews with 13 participants were used to explore their previous volunteer tourism experiences. The interviews revealed that volunteer tourist learning related to three major categories: 1) skills and knowledge, 2) the Other, and 3) Self. The findings suggest that some of the most significant learning gained by volunteer tourists may result from enduring challenging and/or dangerous experiences. Recognising and understanding their learning is encouraged when volunteer tourists engage in critical reflection; however, while some individuals may reflect on their volunteer tourism experiences immediately, others may only reflect long after their project has ended. It is also argued that integrating orientation sessions and educators as elements of formal learning into volunteer tourism programmes may provide volunteer tourists with the knowledge they need to better navigate and process their experiences.