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## VOLUNTEER TOURISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

**Abstract:** This article is a survey of research and a presentation of the standpoints of different researchers on volunteer tourism.

**Key words:** volunteer tourism, mass tourism, volunteering.

Volunteer tourism is a social phenomenon whose influence on tourism is increasingly seen. It is associated with kinds of tourism that are in opposition to mass travel<sup>1</sup>. Those who participate in volunteer tourism programmes are for many reasons outside the scope of the tourism industry, requiring services that are new and seldom offered as they want to see places which are usually not visited by tourists and places which are not even treated as tourism attractions. That is why an academic approach to the subject of volunteer tourism seems to be so important as it may play a role in the foundation of practical services for those who deal with the organisation and servicing of tourism.

It seems likely that the demand for travel offers under the terms of volunteer tourism will rise in the near future. Currently in Poland this demand seems to be small, fulfilled mainly by various non-governmental organizations, foundations and associations whose goal is to help the needy. On the one hand these are organizations providing help for those living in other countries, on the other involved in Poland. The latter are not only looking for foreign volunteers but also often operate on the basis of exchange in international networks. In this case a Polish citizen willing to participate in volunteer tourism abroad takes advantage of the offer submitted by such an organization and in return some volunteer tourist from the other country comes to Poland. At present, this type of organization seems sufficient. However, we can presume that in the near future an increasing number of Poles will be interested in travelling on volunteer tourism programmes. Then there will be a chance for

the commercial sector to organize such programmes.

The inspiration for this article is therefore an attempt to anticipate the development of volunteer tourism in Poland and to present the work of numerous researchers on the sociology of this phenomenon to those interested – mainly employees of NGO's and of travel agencies. In addition the author's aim is to create a foundation upon which it will be possible to study this in Poland at the present stage of its development. This article is a survey of research and a presentation of the standpoints of different researchers on volunteer tourism. Thus, the aim is to create a broad view of the phenomenon discussed here. Therefore, first the presumed origin of volunteer tourism will be dealt with alongside an attempt to describe its dissemination. The results from different researchers will be presented as they concern the motivation of those who have chosen this way of spending their time. Next, critical arguments concerning this type of tourism will be presented. At the end the conclusions drawn from this work will be presented as they can help tourism industry employees to efficiently organize volunteer tourism.

Volunteer tourism is often associated with the appearance of the category of 'new tourist', who – in contradistinction to a 'mass tourist' – is more aware of the influence on the area which he or she visits (MUSTONEN 2005). Someone who chooses more expensive offers, but those which are eco-friendly, may be considered an ideal type of such a 'new tourist'. Thus, such a tourist may need to spend more money since the most important things are experiences, making new acquaintances, and getting to know other

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cultures in as authentic a way as possible. That is also why such a person – who because of his or her worldview chooses ‘couch surfing’ as a way to find accommodation, visits places which are generally not considered as attractive, tries to look under the ‘mask’ which the authorities of a given area show visitors – can also be considered to be a tourist of the new kind. In this context the costs borne by a ‘new tourist’ during his or her trips do not necessarily have to be higher than those which a mass tourist bears.

A conviction that a new type of tourist has appeared is common among those in the tourism industry. Increasingly voices are encountered speaking about the necessity of more legal regulation in the tourism industry as this industry frequently destroys local resources. It is often compared to the banking sector which is often accused of causing the financial crisis which began in 2007. According to these opinions, the tourism industry should be – much as banks are – under the constant and far-reaching supervision of state institutions. In response to these accusations, at the ITB International Tourism Fair Berlin in 2009, an argument was quoted that a characteristics of the activity of a tourist business is to require a final and binding decision by its customers. On the one hand, this makes efficient state regulation in this industry impossible to implement, and on the other, it ensures certainty that the particular decisions of those who manage this sector cannot cause disastrous results as in the case with banks. Finally, it is the tourist who verifies the information given by a tourist business, and so it does not depend on the opinions of those who manage it (*Let Consumers...* 2009).

An example of a model of a responsible tourist may be one who chooses the so-called volunteer tourism service. ‘Volunteer tourism’ is understood here as a kind of voluntary departure from the place of residence whose aim is firstly – to meet new people and visit new places, secondly – to do non-profit work. The purpose of this work is to support what is commonly recognized as important and whose effects are commonly considered as positive. The key element here is the non-profit nature of this work. It is not synonymous with not receiving any wages however, it means that the motivation for the work is not a direct financial or material benefit and that it does not allow significant savings. The volunteer tourism discussed here differs from other types of voluntarism with a tourism goal and its inseparable elements such as the cognitive and psychological desire to interact with the natural, cultural and social qualities of the place visited.

According to TOMAZOS & BUTLER (2009), the beginning of volunteer tourism goes back to the summer of 1920 when a group of volunteers were engaged in assisting the inhabitants of a war-damaged village

near the French city of Verdun. In the period between the two world wars more initiatives of this kind appeared and Tomazos & Butler seek its origin in post-war shock and in the pacifist ideals which were also those of Henri Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross. For years this movement has been developing and in recent times an acceleration of this process can be noticed. In their analysis of volunteer tourism, however, they draw attention to the fact that most of the programmes are not operating in the countries which most need them<sup>2</sup>. In 2007 most were in India, Costa Rica and Peru while the authors of this research considered countries such as Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and Burkina Faso as those which needed them most. An explanation could be suggested by simply referring to the feeling of safety. According to this thesis, volunteers would only go to the countries which they consider relatively safe and politically stable. However, such an interpretation does not tally with research on global tourism, according to which tourism in regions that are considered attractive is relatively rapidly restored after a war is over (*We won't... 2007*<sup>3</sup>).

TOMAZOS & BUTLER (2009) also studied other factors which might influence the number of volunteer tourism programmes in a given country and which it appears did not depend on its population. On the other hand, a clearly visible growth of volunteer tourism can best be seen in countries which have been hit by a major natural disaster (e.g. in Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami), but has not been restricted only to these countries. As Tomazos & Butler claim, these data point to a possibility that behind the development of volunteer tourism are economic factors rather than the actual wish to offer help. It may be said that volunteer tourism is subject to the same market rules as ‘common’ tourism. Especially that in many cases one has to pay for the opportunity to participate in a programme (and also to pay for travel, food and other expenses)<sup>4</sup>.

To ask questions about the motives of those who decide to participate in volunteer tourism seems obvious<sup>5</sup> and answers will be based on using two kinds of research which differ in form. The first, the authors of which are the above-mentioned TOMAZOS & BUTLER (2010), is a field study carried out among volunteers in a Mexican orphanage. From this a picture emerges of voluntary service as a final result of a long decision process influenced by numerous and varied factors. As far as motives are concerned, participants explained their engagement in the programme in six different ways on the basis of Tomazos & Butler's studies. The first is a wish to get away from the everyday routine at the permanent place of residence, which is often connected with the necessity to break away from problems and pressures which today are

a part of life in a highly developed country. The second is a fondness for travel. The third a wish to repay one's life of privilege and the need to give help to those who are poor and whose poverty is no fault of their own. The fourth is connected with the growing distrust of all kinds of charity organisations which bring help to victims and collect funds in developed countries. Tomazos & Butler associate this distrust with many scandals concerning organisations of this type and those who worked for them. Relief consisting in giving definite sums of money or personal support for a given organisation is increasingly often perceived as insufficient as information is widespread about embezzlement or misappropriation of the funds supposed to be used to help the poorest. In view of all this, volunteers prefer to go to a given place themselves and be personally involved in offering help so as to be certain that what they offer will not be wasted or cynically used by dishonest agents. The source of the fifth kind of motivation is a conviction that there will be real benefits to the volunteer from participating in some programme. Apart from the obvious benefits of gaining new perspectives, new experiences and personal development, what is also important here are the real advantages in the employment market. The experience of voluntary service abroad may be favourably seen by employers. Moreover, it allows an increase in one's knowledge of different forms and possibilities of co-operation between representatives of different cultures. For many people volunteer tourism can also be an opportunity to study a foreign language. The source of the final and sixth kind of motivation is pleasure. For volunteers pleasure is an indispensable element of their trip, and for some of them – as can be seen from the research authors' experience – even the only goal to which their whole stay is subordinated, and this is a cause of dismay to local co-workers.

Contrary to Tomazos & Butler's studies, OOI & LAING (2010) carried out research on volunteer tourism which was a part of a larger project on traveller tourism. Using 249 questionnaires, the authors studied tourists who stayed in one of seven selected hostels near Melbourne in Australia. The authors gave those questioned a set of possible answers based on the literature. Thus, it should be emphasised that the kinds of motivation distinguished here are not the result of an analysis of causal opinions of the tourists. However, the Ooi & Laing research enabled their authors to establish a ranking of different kinds of motivation. At the beginning are found such motives as 'experiencing something different and new', 'the wish to travel', 'getting acquainted with other cultures' and 'interaction with the local population'. It was only in 8<sup>th</sup> place that the wish 'to make a difference' was found while 'doing something valu-

able' was 9<sup>th</sup>, supporting communities in developing countries' appeared 12<sup>th</sup>, while 'working with communities in developing countries' was 13<sup>th</sup>. It seems pointless to mention all the kinds of motivation distinguished, however, it is important that the top places were taken by motives which came rather from the personal needs of volunteers for individual development rather than altruism or empathy.

Apart from the research results, Ooi & Laing added some more reflections of their own, throwing new light on questions concerning volunteers' motivations. First, they draw attention to the fact that people who decide to go on such trips may be influenced by their wish to improve their own image and emphasise their own individualism. This reflection seems particularly important in view of the frequent opposition of volunteer tourism to mass tourism, and stressing the altruistic motivation of the volunteers<sup>6</sup>. Second, the authors emphasise that for many an important argument which leads them to go on such a trip is the opportunity to get to know new people and to make new friends. And third, they claim that a motivation is their conviction that they would be visiting an area whose nature and culture are of a unique character. And this may explain the issue brought up earlier of why some countries are more popular among these organisations than others.

Discussing the motivations of volunteers, it is worth adding that they see themselves as tourists differing from the 'typical', and they evaluate this otherness positively, and wish to emphasise it (e.g. LEPP 2009).

It should also be said that if those who are determined to go abroad within a volunteer tourism programme may define their motives differently to those who supervise their work and are their guides who see volunteers as a source of funds and a workforce for their project. Such a conclusion can be drawn from COGHLAN'S (2008) studies. She interviewed six employees of organisations which deal with volunteer tourism.

A comprehensive criticism of volunteer tourism was made by SIMPSON (2004). She based her reflections on an analysis of organisations which offer trips to older British teenagers. According to tradition, many of them spend a year of their lives, most often after they have completed their secondary education and before they start university studies, doing things which are not directly connected with the educational system while acquiring experience and practical knowledge. At that time many of them go for trips abroad to participate in volunteer tourism programmes. Simpson focused her attention on the negative aspects of these programmes. She claims that they are conducive to ethnocentrism and they are also

its manifestation. This is because they are based on a conviction that the development of societies occurs uni-directionally and is to be determined by changes in societies which are a part of Western culture. According to such an assumption, countries of different cultures whose social and economic standards are different, should for their own good become similar to the countries of the West. Volunteer tourism programmes adopt such a line of reasoning by thinking that some countries need help from the outside and the proper people to give such help are British (or any other Western) young people. The key phrases are for instance 'to make a difference', 'to do something valuable' etc. adopted by numerous organisations, are aimed at replacing an outdated and generally criticised notion of 'progress'. Simpson also draws our attention to the fact that people who have no qualifications are sent abroad to take part in volunteer tourism programmes. That is why it can be stated that their only qualification is simply being members of highly developed Western societies. Those who organise volunteer tourism also concentrate on short-term (according to the definition adopted: not more than a year long) activities instead of taking care of long-term strategies lasting many years. The arbitrary decisions made by organisations of this kind, due to which some countries are considered to be more in need of assistance than others, are a further issue. It should also be said that such things as famine and poverty become themselves tourism attractions, and their showing and describing functions to draw more tourists.

After having interviewed the volunteers, Simpson formulated some further critical arguments against this type of tourism. First, she said that participants in such programmes begin to see poverty in countries of the Third World as the only factor which distinguishes them from developed countries. They also very often think that those who suffer poverty are happy with what they have and that they expect from life much less than Western citizens. Comparing their own life situation with those of people whom they encounter when they work as volunteers leads many of them to the conclusion that fate determines everything. The fatalistic belief in 'good luck' or in some supernatural power, which divides people into rich and poor, draws attention away from the real processes of political and economic exploitation. Additionally, volunteer tourism can serve as a source of confirming stereotypes and a conviction about the irreducible otherness or strangeness of the inhabitants of the Third World.

It should be added here that this may result in a kind of reinforcement of stereotypes of the West itself and in the strengthening of its negative image. After all, the image of ignorant Westerners who go

around the world and spread their customs, modern technologies and their idea of progress, is one of the main components of Occidentalism, understood as 'an image of the West, drawn by its enemies, and refusing humanity to its inhabitants' (BURUMA & MARGALIT 2005). It should also be added that tourism is sometimes generally considered as a symptom of neo-colonialism (PODEMSKI 2005, p. 40-44).

Kate Simpson is not the only researcher who is critical of volunteer tourism. However, her opinions are probably more extreme but they allow us to look at this issue from a new point of view. Much less explicit in their opinions are RAYMOND & HALL (2008). They conducted comprehensive studies of ten organisations which deal with volunteer tourism programmes. Their research comprised interviews with employees of these organisations, 'focus studies' among volunteers and starting a blog inviting comments on the results. Research showed that volunteer tourism, by making direct contacts between volunteers and inhabitants of a given region possible, supports the process of disturbing the stereotypes that both have of one another. On the other hand, it was also found that in many cases the knowledge which makes it possible to do away with stereotypes is considered simply to be an exception to the rule. These authors found that the phenomenon of better cross-cultural understanding may indeed be a result of one's stay in a foreign country within the volunteer tourism programme. However, it does not occur automatically in all cases.

Based on their research, Raymond & Hall formulated three pieces of advice for organisations which send volunteers abroad. First, it is important that the programme they develop should fulfil the needs of local communities. So, first of all volunteers should not take the workplaces of the inhabitants or question the value of the jobs done by them. Second, organisations should motivate volunteers to reflect on and use their own experiences concerning other cultures. A way to resolve these problems could be the organisation of discussions or the encouragement to write diaries. Third, the process of mutual acquaintance of volunteers and the inhabitants of a given area, e.g. through placing volunteers in homes of the local population, or by assigning volunteers and local workers to carry out the assigned tasks together. This is even more important, according to the results of Raymond & Hall's studies, than the thesis that volunteers understand other cultures better through staying in multicultural groups of other volunteers. Organisations often bring together volunteers of the same nationality or of the same culture. Sometimes they even try to send for a selected programme those who have much more in common (e.g. everybody they send are young Britons).

COGHLAN (2008) would add another piece of advice: employees of organisations which prepare volunteer tourism programmes should realise that people of different qualifications and motivations decide to take such trips. Therefore, care should be taken to place them well, self-development and tasks should be given to appropriate people. Those who manage volunteer tourism programmes in places where they are carried out should also possess the same competences as those of tourism guides.

Volunteer tourism, whose rapid development has been observed in recent years, is an unusually interesting phenomenon from a sociological point of view. It is hoped that academic understanding can be the foundation for the practical endeavours of tourism industry employees who address their offer to customers whose needs and demands are increasingly varied. Advice provided by experienced researchers who know the market for services related to volunteer tourism in other countries, may be a source of inspiration to activities for non-profit organizers of this type of programme.

At the theoretical level it should be noted that volunteer tourism is an extremely interesting phenomenon, which is further evidence of the changes taking place in the modern societies of developed countries. The emergence of new tourism categories of which volunteer tourism is certainly one, is a reflection of the fact that the traditional formula of tourism in these societies has reached a limit. Today increasing emphasis is put on such things as the full experience and emotional processing of new stimuli, not only to the process of receiving them. Visiting a monument and taking a picture of it becomes to a large group of people an insufficient experience. Volunteer tourism allows experience of a different environment in a unique way, combined with the awareness of helping other people or joining a cause (e.g. environmental one). The development of volunteer tourism can assume that the needs of a contemporary tourist will evolve to become even more complex.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although it is difficult to consider volunteer tourism as a form of alternative tourism, cf.: ISAŃSKI (2008, pp. 30-33).

<sup>2</sup> The need for help was measured using the HDI development index, used also by the United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> According to a study published by Tourism Intelligence International and described in this article, the number of British tourists returned to its regular level 8 months after the end of the hostilities. In the case of German tourists it took 11 months.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes it is considered as a distinguishing factor between the volunteer tourism and the regular volunteer work, cf. OOI & LAING (2010, p. 192).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that – as claimed by PODEMSKI & ISAŃSKI (2008) – “tourists are among the most difficult groups of respondents in social science research”.

<sup>6</sup> The idea according to which mass tourism and volunteer tourism are something totally different, perhaps even contradictory, and that volunteering tourism is a result of the need to help others, is present not only in the academic literature, but also in journalistic texts – cf. FLOREK (2009).

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