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Evaluating volunteer tourism: has it made a difference?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges of evaluating volunteer tourism and looks towards possibilities for rethinking the ways in which the phenomenon is conceptualised. We reflect on the debates and practices that have emerged since the first theoretical exploration introduced over 15 years ago in a book titled *Volunteer tourism: Experiences that make a difference*. This review paper commences with a discussion of the criticisms that have been targeted at both research and practice, and reflects on the need to rethink how volunteer tourism is evaluated. We argue that the volunteer tourism industry must respond to criticisms from academics and the media and move towards conscious choices that reframe volunteer tourism away from development aid towards intercultural mutuality and decommodification.

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Volunteer tourism; volunteer tourists; decommodification; intercultural exchange; mutuality; community

Introduction

This conceptual paper engages research and theory to address the question posed over 15 years ago as to whether volunteer tourism ‘makes a difference’ (Wearing, 2001). Since that time, volunteer tourism has been plagued by criticism, much of which is substantiated by unacceptable practices taking place globally to generate profit from volunteer tourists. For example, according to the United Nations (2008), the 2004 Asian tsunami left close to 1500 children without 1 or both of their parents or an immediate guardian. Orphanages were set up and caring for orphaned children became one of the most popular, yet controversial, volunteer tourism activities (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Such practices have led to significant critique around volunteer tourism experiences that take place in orphanages, whereby it has been suggested that it is better not to send volunteer tourists into these types of destinations (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015). Indeed, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation is categorically opposed to orphanage volunteer tourism because of the long-term problems it can create, such as abandonment and related emotional issues for orphaned children. The growth of the orphanage volunteer tourism is ‘blamed for widespread corruption and exploitation of children for profit’ (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015, p. 132).

This example presents a key dilemma facing contemporary volunteer tourism research and practice, namely, how can volunteer tourism be developed in regions

where it is most needed without creating longer term problems for local communities? To date, there is no comprehensive mechanism for evaluating the outcomes of such volunteer tourism practices. Increasingly, volunteer tourism (and, in particular, volunteer orphanage tourism) is undergoing trial by media and the academy, with voluntourism seen to reinforce dominant paradigms associated with development aid whereby rich Westerners help the poor communities of the majority world (Everingham, 2017; McGloin & Georgeou, 2015). And while we agree that significant organisational and structural changes are needed to disrupt commodified experiences, we also urge for these criticisms to be evaluated through research that recognises the diversity and complexity of volunteer tourism organisations and experiences. Ultimately, we argue for practices that move towards the facilitation of meaningful intercultural exchange in volunteer tourism and away from the unrealistic neocolonial outcomes associated with the persistent development aid model of volunteer tourism.

Background: from volunteering to voluntourism

The volunteer tourism industry established in a context where volunteers had different motivations for travelling from that of traditional and mass tourists: volunteer tourists were seeking more sustainable and responsible tourism experiences that provided benefits to local communities and transformative learning for volunteers. This

desire to contribute to local communities and the opportunities for cultural exchange were central, as volunteer tourists undertook holidays that involved 'aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). This early valorisation of volunteer tourism and its promotion as an ethic of global citizenship – where altruism and community were considered central to the experience – have been extensively criticised (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; McGehee, 2002; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). These critiques oscillate around the various political dimensions evident in various cultural contexts, including power, empowerment and equity (Wearing, Stevenson, & Young, 2010), as well as the pursuit of economic neo-liberalism and the consequent commodification of 'voluntourism' (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Sin, 2009; Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Since its growth as a global tourism phenomenon, a range of definitions and perspectives have emerged in the extant literature (for a detailed review of the field of study, see Wearing & McGehee, 2013). While many authors traditionally positioned volunteer tourism as a form of alternative tourism (e.g. Britton & Clarke, 1987; Cohen, 1987; Dernoï, 1981, 1988; Ellis, 2003; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Holden, 1984; Pearce, 1980; Sorensen, 1997; Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003; Wearing, 2001, 2003, 2004; Wearing & Neil, 2000, 2001), others placed it broadly as an extension of ecotourism (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Wearing & Neil, 1997). Similarly, volunteer tourism has been discussed as 'new tourism' (Poon, 1993), 'niche tourism' (Novelli, 2005) and 'new moral tourism' (Butcher, 2003, 2005). More recently, research has positioned volunteer tourism with labels, such as 'charity', 'justice', 'pro-poor' or 'goodwill' tourism (Butcher, 2003; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Rogerson, 2011; Scheyvens, 2007; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Theerapappisit, 2009). These latter examples firmly establish volunteer tourism within a development aid context, leading others to call for differentiations and delineations between volunteer organisations and volunteer tourist experiences to understand the complexity of the industry (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Everingham, 2015, 2017; Lyons et al., 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014b; Smith & Holmes, 2009). These varying definitions and conceptualisations reflect growing debates and critiques within the study of tourism, and demonstrate the expansion and consequent commodification of the industry.

The problematic outcomes that come from the commodification of the industry have been the key focus of many critiques of volunteer tourism, where the focus is on the capitalisation of a 'helping model' that shapes

the behaviours and expectations of volunteers (Everingham, 2015; Higgins-Desbiolles & Mundine, 2008; Lyons et al., 2012; Palacios, 2010; Smith & Font, 2015). For example, a 2016 online editorial by the World Travel Guide (Columbus Travel Media, 2016) warns that volunteer organisations are pocketing the profits while sending volunteers on 'unsatisfying purpose-built placements'. This media report describes an example of volunteer tourists paying large sums of money to build a school in Tanzania as part of a volunteer project. According to this report, the volunteers saw themselves as 'active helpers' in a host community where local people were viewed as being 'passive' and 'lazy'. However, throughout the project it became apparent to the volunteers that the locals were actually 'lazing about' during the day because they had been awake all night tearing down the buildings and rebuilding them properly before the mostly unskilled volunteers arrived for 'work' the next day. According to Everingham (2015, p. 178), examples such as this, that frame volunteer tourism within a 'helping model', ultimately lead to 'disappointment and frustration when volunteers find they have little capacity to provide such help'.

The ensuing argument that volunteer tourism reinforces neo-liberal ideologies emphasises that volunteers often experience greater benefit than the local communities through building up their *curricula vitae* that provide individuals with important cultural capital for 'global citizenship' (Lyons et al., 2012; Vradi, 2013; Wilson, 2015). Furthermore, some critics argue that volunteer tourism works to externalise and depoliticise the development process as part of the neo-liberal global order (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Devereux, 2008; Mostafanezhad, 2014a; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). Development becomes privatised and commodified in volunteer tourism and the focus shifts away from enacting structural change towards individual (minority world) ethical consumption (Butcher & Smith, 2015).

These condemnations of volunteer tourism from academics, the industry and the media are important, yet they present many complex challenges that make it difficult to identify and conceptualise solutions to many of these issues. To add to this challenge, there remains no comprehensive mechanism for evaluating the outcomes from exploitative volunteer tourism practices. It is clear that there continues to exist a vast complexity of issues and power relations in contemporary global volunteer tourism encounters (Crossley, 2012; Everingham, 2015, 2016; Mostafanezhad, 2014a; Palacios, 2010; Vradi, 2013). Thus perhaps, as Benson suggests, the focus of attention should be more on evaluating and assessing individual projects to better determine if, and how, they are 'making a difference'.

Can volunteer tourism make a difference?

The majority of volunteer tourism research undertaken in the earlier years in which it gained attention failed to recognise that volunteer tourism is not a homogenous product, nor did researchers articulate any base understanding of its negative or positive contribution or impacts (Broad, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Brown & Morrison, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Clifton & Benson, 2006; Galley & Clifton, 2004; Gard McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Mustonen, 2005; Singh, 2002, 2004; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). Initially, the research took an advocacy stance, promoting volunteer tourism as an ideal activity with few negative impacts (Broad, 2003; Broad & Jenkins, 2008; Brown & Morrison, 2003; McGehee, 2002; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). At this time, it was generally accepted that volunteer tourists sought altruistic experiences that were different from mass tourism. Furthermore, the research identified a number of positive motivations for volunteer tourism, including self-development, giving back to the host community, participating in community development and fostering cultural understanding (Brown, 2005; Brown & Morrison, 2003; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Coghlan, 2008; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing & Dean, 2003). In support of volunteer tourism, researchers pointed to a variety of positive volunteer tourism types, including cultural and historical restoration, medical assistance, educational support, ecological conservation and environmental conservation (Coghlan, 2008; Cousins, 2007; Cousins, Evans, & Sadler, 2009; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Rattan, Eagles, & Mair, 2012; Uriely et al., 2003).

Thus, it could be argued that the inevitable occurred in volunteer tourism with the 'adaptation [which occurs] under the influence of commercialization' (Krippendorff, 1982, p. 142) and the domination of the touring cultures over the toured host communities (Wearing et al., 2010). At the more macro social level, this could be aligned with the rise of a politically correct new moral tourism (Butcher, 2003; Butcher & Smith, 2010) that signals the widespread recognition that tourism is damaging to host cultures, communities and their environments. For the touring nations, this means that tourism is no longer an innocent pleasure, hence the emergence of tourism that attempts to minimise negative impacts or somehow 'give back', such as volunteer tourism.

Butcher and Smith (2010) have linked volunteering with the development of citizenship and international volunteering with a sense of global citizenship. Indeed, such a link is also being made at national policy levels, particularly in developed nations. But a neo-liberal

tourism industry focuses on taking that phenomenon and centralising profit, which in turn reduces the activity to something almost unrecognisable from its original intentions. This can be seen in the work of Godfrey, Wearing, and Schulenkorf (2015) who demonstrate how, in some places, volunteer tourism has become mass tourism. If then volunteer tourism has become commodified to the extent that it is no longer separable from mainstream tourism (i.e. takes on its values and becomes another niche market), what mechanisms can be explored that will enable volunteer tourism to move on from this commodified exploitation? One avenue that appears to offer some opportunities is that of decommodification (Everingham, 2017; Wearing, Archer, & Jackson, 2003; Wearing & Grabowski, 2011; Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005; Wearing & Ponting, 2006; Wearing & Wearing, 1999, 2014, 2016). We suggest that a decommodification approach has some traction for future directions in volunteer tourism.

Everingham (2017) argues that any comprehensive evaluation of volunteer tourism projects needs to be conducted in such a way that is attentive to the diversity of volunteer tourism organisations, volunteer tourists and local communities involved in the projects. Importantly, distinctions also need to be made between the commodification of volunteer tourism and decommodified volunteer tourism organisations (Everingham, 2017; Phelan, 2015; Smith & Font, 2015). While it is imperative that research seeks to ensure that stakeholders are able to assess their practice outcomes, this agenda may not be in the interests of volunteer tourism organisations that are operating from a profit basis – as opposed to those organisations that are genuinely putting the needs of host communities first.

Part of the problem with thinking through an evaluation framework is that distinctions between different types of volunteering and volunteer organisations are often glossed over (Benson, 2015). In reality, there are a wide variety of organisations operating within, what tends to be presented as, the all-encompassing 'volunteer tourism industry'. Yet, as Everingham (2017) asserts, the diversity of organisations that also attract volunteer tourists include those that operate on a profit basis; hence, these as well as not-for-profits (NFPs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must be addressed. Indeed, Popham (2015) argues, in his discussion of an NFP charity in the United Kingdom that sets up volunteers with projects worldwide, that it is 'a mistake to lump together good volunteering with bad volunteering and call it all "voluntourism"'. This is because criticisms that apply to some organisations may not apply to others. Certainly, in research that addresses the heterogeneity of volunteer organisations, it was found that

the most expensive volunteer tourism organisations tend to be the least 'responsible' and more concerned with profit than 'doing good' (Smith & Font, 2015).

In light of these concerns, we argue that in order to distinguish between organisations that are decommodified versions of volunteer tourism, more research needs to be conducted around the variety of volunteer tourism organisations and the diversity of volunteer tourists. While many of the problems of volunteer tourism may stem from the misguided altruism of volunteers, the issues that arise from orphanage volunteer tourism are quite specific and considerably different from those issues that arise from volunteering to work on conservation projects or build schools and houses. In addition to the need to work through the problems that arise within specific types of volunteering, we argue that the commodification of 'voluntourism' and the 'volunteer tourism industry' within a development aid context has caused many of these underlying problems which, arguably, manifest in different and complex ways.

It could be said that many new ideas are soon encompassed and co-opted by the existing power structures that control an industry. The global free market regime sees the commodification of goods, services, experiences and culture (Rifkin, 2000, p. 97), which, together, are adopted by practitioners seeking improved market share. Volunteer tourism is an example of this commodified industry where operators have neglected, to a large degree, the philosophies, ethics and values upon why many volunteers choose to volunteer in the first place. Recently, too much of volunteer tourism has instead become just problem-solving with a narrow applied focus on how to better volunteer tourism from within a limited idea of neocolonial development aid, rather than moving beyond the development aid model entirely (Everingham, 2015, 2016; Palacios, 2010). The full breadth of available social science research paradigms becomes neglected and so the commodification of the area is perceived to be complete.

Volunteer tourism is too often described within overly narrow and limited analytical frames (Sin, Oakes, & Mostafanezhad, 2015). While acknowledging the power of the development aid discourse in shaping a neocolonial approach by tourists and institutional actors towards volunteer tourism, the actual experiences and practices of volunteer tourists demand 'a broader yet more nuanced set of evaluative tools' (Sin et al., 2015, p. 123). Sharpley (2000, p. 1) in his exploration of the theoretical divide between 'tourism' and 'sustainable development' argues that 'tourism development remains embedded in early modernisation theory whilst the principles of sustainable tourism overlook the characteristics of the production and consumption

of tourism'. We believe that, in moving forward, volunteer tourism research must be positioned through alternate forms of knowing. We seek to point volunteer tourism in a specific direction and challenge the perception that it must inevitably coalesce to the mainstream and become 'commodified'. As Everingham (2016) points out, the future is not foreclosed, and there are possibilities for hope within spaces of the 'not-yet-become'. However, in taking a more positive and hopeful stance, volunteer tourism must take a decommodifying agenda in order to enable it to return to the value set and definitions inherent to its early rise as a form of alternative tourism (Wearing, 2001).

Part of this shift in direction for volunteer tourism involves a shift in how volunteer tourism is analysed and described. In his influential book, the sociologist Law (2004) discusses the messiness of method, that method is active in the way that it 're-works and re-bundles and so re-crafts realities' (p. 143). Method, thus, 'creates new versions of the world' (Law, 2004, p. 143). He reminds us of the importance of foregrounding the connections between forms of knowing and embodiment (Law, 2004). Both Everingham (2015, 2016) and Griffiths (2014, 2015, 2016) argue that volunteer tourism researchers need to be aware of the performative effects of their research. This view acknowledges the importance of keeping analyses open to see all inquiries as situated; in other words, thinking through our relations with what we know and bringing realities into being.

For instance, Everingham (2015, p. 176) suggests that the 'performative nature of critiques in volunteer tourism can reify the relations of power that are often the objects of their criticism'. She urges volunteer tourism researchers to 'be cognizant of the multiple worlds and realities that co-exist, which are equally valid and deserve cultivating and nurturing' (Everingham, 2015). By highlighting the possibilities that come from intercultural connections in volunteer tourism, Everingham (2015, p. 176) sees a way of cultivating 'a less paternalistic configuration of volunteer tourism'. Similarly, Griffiths (2014) argues that we need to find ways to understand and describe the rich intersubjective encounters in volunteer tourism in a way that does not limit encounters to neoliberal frameworks. Attention to the 'meetings of bodies' and 'affective moments' which 'give rise to love solidarity and hope' is key to 'making research socially engaged' (Griffiths, 2014, p. 89). For Kolet (2014), the recognition of how hope manifests, and the volunteers' experiences of hope, allows researchers to appreciate the complexity of the volunteer experience.

Certainly, it is possible that criticisms of volunteer tourism may lead to feelings of hopelessness with the

development industry seeking to impose its professionalism; the mainstream tourism industry seeking its economic efficiency, profit mongering and tourist sovereignty; governments seeking cheaper ways to provide assistance to communities they are responsible for; and NGOs looking for other income streams. On top of this comes the incumbent academic research that provides short, quick insights, commonly negative and not undertaken in the spaces that these exchanges occur in by engaging with the communities over substantial periods of time. It is also often built on theoretical research frameworks that are gazing from a distance in providing commentary and analysis (see, e.g. Butcher, 2003, 2005, 2006; Butcher & Smith, 2010, 2015). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that volunteer tourism is confronted by tension, dilemma and paradox, with multiple vested interest groups imposing upon it a rigid view. This is an inevitable outcome in the process of commodification and if conscious choices are not made now on directions and appropriate boundaries, this area will spend a long time lost in the wilderness of debating who should own its ontological and epistemological direction.

The volunteer tourism dilemma: moving forward

We need to strip back our conceptualisation of volunteer tourism as a form of alternative experience that moves the tourist beyond simply visiting or 'passing through' a place as an 'outsider'. Instead, the volunteer tourist spends time living in and contributing in positive ways to a community, an experience in keeping with a belief in the notion of 'mutual benefit' (Everingham, 2015; Matthews, 2008). According to Everingham (2016), we can centralise this idea by choosing to be hopeful and looking forward. Choosing to do this inevitably invites critiques from various theoretical observers who view volunteer tourism through a certain lens, particularly those who privilege neo-liberal and neocolonial development models in their analyses.

For example, when viewed through the lens of professionalism, the question of whether volunteers have sufficient skills or indeed stay long enough to really make a difference has been posed (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Through the lens of project management, it has been argued that volunteer tourism projects need to be carefully managed in order to avoid 'cross-cultural misunderstanding and the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes' (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 530). And the lens of commercialism views volunteer tourism as an expensive pastime for affluent travellers (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). While it is important not to

devalue these important criticisms, it can be argued that they help direct 'volunteer tourism' and enable the emergence of the hegemonic processes of neo-liberalism in volunteer tourism to be examined and to a degree resisted so that it does not become co-opted by neo-liberalist ideologies. The question now is: how do we move beyond this dilemma to once again claim that volunteer tourism can be 'making a difference'?

To do so, there is a need to recentre the precommodified values that were centralised in volunteer tourism when constructed in the alternative paradigm. In our view, there needs to be a high degree of importance placed upon the interdependent relationship the local community shares with the volunteer tourist. Within a decommodified agenda, the community development approach could offer a return to some of the original foundational ideals that drove volunteer tourism in its formulation. Everingham's (2015) research with a grass-roots NFP community-based organisation that focuses on creativity and language exchange – rather than development aid – demonstrates the potentials for mutual intercultural connections that can arise in volunteer tourism spaces. Attention to the diversity of volunteer tourism organisations, particularly NGOs and NFPs, and those working with existing local initiatives, from the bottom-up rather than the top-down, who are not operating from a profit-driven motive, demonstrates how a decommodified agenda could advocate change from within communities, rather than outside and top-down, and that power and decision-making associated with that change should be community-driven and controlled. Communities retain and exercise control in tourism or elements of its development and implementation.

The privileging of neo-liberal commentary where, for example, Butcher and Smith (2010, p. 30) view volunteer tourism as a product of contemporary 'life politics' and the creation of 'morally justifiable lifestyles' does not give much practical space for thinking through hopeful possibilities in volunteer tourism. They argue that given the 'decline of political alternatives to the market ... aspects of our lives that were previously unproblematic (shopping or holidays, e.g.) become politicized (or moralized)' (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 33). By distancing the debate from what happens to why it happens as a form of social action through consumption, Butcher and Smith (2010) point to a dimension of this sector which may play on the desire of volunteering individuals to 'buy out' the guilt associated with their privilege.

In trying to refocus the direction of volunteer tourism, we suggest it needs to move back to a focus on community development and its key contribution of exchange, which suggests that destination communities have

agencies and can be trusted to engage with volunteer tourism in a way that is more beneficial for them. This would then direct volunteer tourism research, commentators and the media to look at how volunteer tourism can demonstrate and contribute to best practice in community-based activities that arises from its operation within the destination community. Outcomes then can be examined in terms of benefits for local communities and acknowledgement can be given to the need for trust and respect at the micro social level between the community and the volunteer. This respect and trust can only come through the recognition of the 'other', which can then lead to equitable outcomes for community members (remembering that not all host communities are homogeneous). For this to happen, more research is needed to uncover these existing practices, where volunteers are already engaging in ways that lead to intercultural learning, understanding, trust, care and empathy (Everingham, 2015, 2016; Griffiths, 2014; Koleth, 2014). This understanding also requires organisations to facilitate these practices (Everingham, 2015). The importance of facilitating intercultural exchange in volunteer tourism and being attentive to these moments in academic analysis is outlined by Everingham, who states:

[V]olunteer tourism organisations and volunteer tourism academics need to more seriously engage with instances and potentialities of intercultural exchange, where all those involved can contribute and are seen to imbue agency within these processes. Scholarship around volunteer tourism plays an important performative role in rethinking (and performing) a reimagined volunteer tourism practice. It is only through an intentional reconfiguring of volunteer tourism *away from* development aid as an inevitable point of reference, *towards* valuing engagement with intercultural communication and mutuality as important in its own right, that new relationships can emerge and flourish. (2015, p. 13)

To effectively provide benefits across cultural differences within tourism, there is a need to include research approaches that allow for the inclusion of the 'other'. That is, the host community's view is not merely a component of the study, but, rather, a fundamental part of the development of the approach. Too much of the current research on volunteer tourism denies agency to local communities, by writing them into research as 'passive other'. Tourism scholars are now calling for decolonial research practices that 'legitimises the cosmologies of, and actively empowers, traditionally marginalised groupings' (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015, p. 1). An epistemological decolonisation of how we approach the study of tourism entails critically thinking through how one positions oneself in the research and how one comes to know 'the researched' (Chambers &

Buzinde, 2015). The movement to examine ways of including different people in research, such as indigenous communities and their perspectives, can only add to an evolution of ideas for volunteer tourism (Wearing et al., 2010).

In moving forward then in how we conceptualise volunteer tourism, we suggest it is desirable to work with flexible models that are more *in situ* and acknowledge the exchange between the actors in that space, rather than those constructed from a distance from a selected menu of theory or value-laden motivations, such as the development industry, which co-opt those actors who are engaged in the exchange via professionalised expertise and standardised models. Indeed, tourism research is beginning to draw on methodologies, such as actor network theory, to emphasise the importance of 'relationships between actors in practice' (Beard, Scarles, & Tribe, 2016, p. 97). Actor network theory highlights the importance of tourism as 'a process through which places are ordered, performed and produced' (Beard et al., 2016, p. 97) in which 'tourismsapes' contain complex relationships between 'networked people and things', opening up analysis to 'alternative structures of power and relationships' (p. 98). This theory brings to the fore the researcher as situated within a network of actors and, in doing so, imbues all actors with agency in relationally constructing their experiences within tourism. For future directions in volunteer tourism research, a deeper analysis of the diversity of interactions and dialogue between volunteer tourists, members of destination communities and volunteering organisations is needed.

Conclusion

Coinciding with the global expansion of volunteer tourism has been the growth of research concerned with the practice of volunteering in the tourism context (Wearing & McGeehee, 2013). Emerging from this growth have been many debates, some with a meritorious viewpoint, that suggest that global forms of belonging, responsibility and political action, combined with the assistance provided in developing countries, are sufficient to warrant the continued pursuit of this form of tourism (Lyons et al., 2012). Other research argues for the reframing of how we think about volunteer tourism as 'making a difference' and the need to move away from measuring it within neocolonial development outcomes and towards the meaningful intercultural connections and relationships that can develop in volunteer tourism (Everingham, 2015). Arguably, the most dangerous position for volunteer tourism is one of tacit acceptance of any paradigm without conscious

and critical exploration of the choice and the implications of those choices.

The shift to academic research focusing on critique and the homogenisation of how volunteer tourism is understood has potentially limited conceptualising how the positive and hopeful features of volunteer tourism can be brought back to the fore. In particular, we have considered how recent research has established an anti-commodification stance and a related anti-development stance. We also explored the way volunteer tourism has potential for mutually beneficial cultural, ethical and sustainable exchanges of knowledge between individuals and cultures. So by going back to the fundamental question: *does volunteer tourism make a difference?* we have proposed that the notion of 'difference' has been interpreted in a variety of ways over the past two decades, and that how we evaluate 'making a difference' is often confined within an outdated development aid model. Thus, in this paper, we have argued for researchers to look at the concept of 'making a difference' not through the lens of 'helping', but through a lens of intercultural understanding and mutuality.

We see a future for volunteer tourism as a partnership between volunteers and destination communities which seeks to provide opportunities for rich intercultural exchanges and intercultural understanding. This approach to development moves beyond modernist development frameworks by avoiding the evaluation of volunteer tourism within development aid outcomes. The focus of whether or not volunteer tourism effectively delivers aid in many of the criticisms of volunteer tourism is the lack of experience, both in destination communities and volunteer tourists. These are valid concerns; however, this misses the point of what volunteer tourism should be about, that is, volunteers and local communities coming together, either through conservation projects or community-orientated projects to interact in mutually beneficial cultural exchanges. Volunteer tourism provides a context that involves taking on roles outside those in everyday life and interacting with others in far distant places. These roles produce acts that are perceived and interpreted by 'significant others' (significant others can include tour group, host community or own community) and may redefine the individual (the participants or the community members) as a result of these interactions.

The social interactions between volunteers on the project sites and representatives of the community, group and natural environment form an exchange of relational influences, and each of these actors imbue agency to the volunteering experience. These interactions in the travel experience contain possibilities for

effecting changes in self and identity (Wearing et al., 2010). When the behaviour and values of volunteers are impacted upon in these ways, they can come away from the experience with a changed value for the social and physical environments visited. These experiences may also have engendered changes within the field of interaction, such as in representatives of the destination community (Wearing, 1998). Therefore, the future of volunteer tourism necessitates not only the adoption of sustainable and decommodified practices, but also the facilitation of spaces where deep intercultural exchanges can happen. This also requires acknowledging the agency of volunteers and local communities to create the outcomes that they desire. This requires a fundamental paradigm shift away from the current *status quo* of viewing volunteer tourism as an experiential commodity that is exploited under the banner of free market economy, to containing possibilities for a decommodified experience of intrinsic value to both volunteers and destination communities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Dr. Stephen Wearing is a conjoint professor at the University of Newcastle (UoN), Australia. His research interests include sustainable tourism planning and management; ecotourism; community-based and volunteer tourism; environmentalism; geography and sociology of leisure and tourism; and social sciences in protected area management.

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Phoebe Everingham is a Ph.D candidate in the discipline of Geography and Environmental studies at the UoN, Australia. Her research focus is on volunteer tourism in South America, where she has developed relationships with two organisations in Peru and Ecuador. Phoebe is particularly interested in the ways in which volunteer tourism can foster intercultural understanding and mutuality, drawing on postcolonial, decolonial, and affective theories.

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