

6th International Research Symposium in Service Management, IRSSM-6 2015, 11-15 August
2015, UiTM Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Volunteer Tourists' Motivation and Satisfaction: A Case of Batu Puteh Village Kinabatangan Borneo

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism experiences represent a combination of both voluntary work and travel. The success of a volunteer program lies in its ability to create a balance between opportunities to learn, experience new things, have fun, and contribute to worthwhile projects. Using the Volunteer Program at Batu Puteh Village in Kinabatangan, Malaysian Borneo as the case study, the present study determines the factors that drive individuals to participate in the program. It also examines volunteer tourists' satisfaction with their volunteer tourism experiences. Additionally, the present study looks at the relationship between volunteer tourists' satisfaction level and their behavioral intention. The results of the study demonstrate that volunteer tourists of the Batu Puteh Volunteer Program came with a desire to experience something completely new and to interact with local people. The study also reveals a significant difference between the expectations and perceptions of the volunteer tourism experience attributes. Despite the gap, the overall satisfaction level leans toward the high point of the satisfaction scale, suggesting that Batu Puteh Village provides a satisfactory volunteer tourism experience.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak

Keywords: volunteer tourism; tourist satisfaction; importance-performance analysis

1. Introduction

The changing dynamic of tourism has created a trend where tourists seek purpose and meaning in their holidays,

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giving birth to a tourism phenomenon known as volunteer tourism (VT). This form of travel usually attracts volunteers from across the globe to such places as biological reserves, rainforests and conservation areas. Africa, Central and South Americas as well as Asia have become the major hotspots for VT. Slogans like ‘Want to really make a difference?’ (Earthwatch) and ‘It is the Experience of a Lifetime’ (Cross-Cultural Solutions) can generate enormously different expectations among volunteer tourists.

This is particularly true if clear explanations of the VT trips are absent. Coren and Gray (2011) reported that volunteer tourists to Vietnam and Thailand conveyed hard criticisms of their respective Volunteer Tourism Organizations (VTOs) because their expectations were not matched with the realities of the projects that they were involved in. Specifically, their personal expectations to gain an experience linked to environmental issues and to have a direct contact with the local communities were not met (Sirasoonthorn & Coren, 2010). This situation confirms Coghlan’s (2007) viewpoint that “a mismatch between the volunteers’ expectations and their actual experiences may lead to decreased satisfaction levels and lowered volunteer motivation and commitment.” Therefore, a sound understanding of volunteer tourists’ satisfaction is critical in order to be able to develop good volunteer programs, increase the number of enrolled volunteers, create a higher possibility of repeat volunteers and elicit positive recommendations. Research on VT has not been new. Nevertheless, literature on the subject has primarily focused on the benefits of VT, and extensive studies have simply entailed the profiling of volunteers or the investigating of their motivations (Brown, 2005; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Wearing 2001; Chen & Chen, 2011). Thus, the present study fills the gap in the literature by examining volunteer tourists’ expectations and perceptions and by looking at the relationship between volunteer tourists’ satisfaction and their behavioural intention, specifically the intention to re-visit and to recommend.

2. Background

2.1. Volunteer tourism

VT industry has grown in importance since the 1970s (Wearing, 2004). The roots of voluntary activities date back to the 19th century when the altruistic and missionary movements attempted to control the explicit class divisions in society. Both the volunteer sector and international tourism experienced significant growth during the late 20th century (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). There is a wide range of VT definitions (Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Wearing, 2001, 2002). The most commonly cited definition reflects Wearing’s (2001) definition of volunteer tourists as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment”. People engaging in VT pay to travel to a location where they choose to engage in a meaningful experience, which generally involves helping local communities or the volunteer host by such means as providing necessities and other resources, restoring and conserving environments, or supporting in field research related to protecting the environment or endangered species of animals (Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001).

2.2. Volunteer motivations

Individuals partaking in voluntary work are usually altruistically motivated (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Wearing & Neil, 1997; Bussell and Forbes, 2002), distinguishing them from the mainstream tourists who are motivated by escapism (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007; Mustonen, 2005). Volunteers are also likely to have egoistic motives. They may be driven by the prospects of excitement, fun, adventure, and meeting others (Gazley, 2001, as cited in Broad, 2003; Bussell & Forbes, 2002). As indicated by Wearing (2001), volunteers usually expect a bi-lateral experience, hoping the experience would not only benefit the host community, but would also contribute to personal development. Cultural immersion, giving back and making a difference to those less privileged, establishing relationships with individuals that share the same interests, seeking educational and bonding opportunities for children, learning about the environment, engaging in conservation work and developing new skills and abilities are other main motivators for volunteer vacationers (Brown, 2005; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Broad, 2003; Broad & Jenkins, 2009; Campbell & Smith, 2006).

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