

## CONTEMPORARY POLICY DEBATE

### Volunteer tourism policy in Thailand

Mary Mostafanezhad<sup>a\*</sup> and Nick Kontogeorgopoulos<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Tourism, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand;* <sup>b</sup>*Department of International Political Economy, Puget Sound University, Tacoma, WA, USA*

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More than three decades ago, Turner and Ash observed that ‘tourism has proved remarkably ineffective as a promoter of equality and as an ally of the oppressed’ and how ‘a politically aware tourism has shown no signs of materializing: one cannot imagine modern NGO coordinators supporting the struggles of the French students and workers in any recurrence of the 1968 May riots’ (Turner & Ash, 1975, p. 53). In response to what is perceived by some as tourism’s historical ineffectiveness at tackling poverty, new forms of tourism have emerged in an attempt to ameliorate some of the excesses and damaging externalities associated with conventional mass tourism. Today a significant sector of the industry has branched off into what is variously referred to as alternative, responsible, ethical, fair, green, social justice or moral tourism. Volunteer tourism – the fastest growing niche tourism market – embodies several principles associated with alternative tourism, including the generation of community benefits, the importance of intimate interactions between tourist and host, the authenticity of the experience and the small scale of the activities involved.

In countries such as Thailand, opportunities to participate in short-term voluntary service have mushroomed in response to growing demand for alternative tourism experiences. Although almost universally lauded in its nascent years, volunteer tourism has become the source of contentious debate in recent years. Sin (2009) argues that:

between those who applaud volunteer tourism’s presupposed benefits and those who prefer to take a more cynical view towards the phenomenon, there is arguably a lack of middle-ground with substantial research that presents a balanced view of volunteer tourism for what it really is. (p. 481)

In this paper, we argue how short-term volunteering in Thailand might be able, under the right circumstances, to generate learning benefits for both volunteers and hosts. However, we maintain that the increasing involvement of conventional tourism firms and the Thai state threatens to compromise the potential benefits of volunteer tourism.

Volunteer tourism in Thailand faces myriad practical challenges. Thailand is a convenient and attractive tourism destination overall, and therefore draws volunteers for

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [mary.mostafanezhad@otago.ac.nz](mailto:mary.mostafanezhad@otago.ac.nz)

many of the same reasons as mass tourists. However, as Thailand continues to develop and embrace modernity, it risks losing its allure for those who wish to volunteer in countries perceived to be in need of their voluntary efforts. Moreover, if the number of volunteer tourists in Thailand continues to grow at the current rate, and profit earning opportunities continue to expand, the industry could be co-opted by outside investors. For example, experience in northern Thailand has shown how successful tourism operations are often taken over by outsiders with better access to infrastructure and capital. Cultural tourism in 'Long Neck Karen' and 'Big Ear Karen' communities often began as community-based development projects. Today, they are highly successful tourism 'attractions'. Their images are appropriated and reproduced by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Thailand's tourism marketing body, and thousands of other organizations and companies that profit from their perceived cultural authenticity and uniqueness. Meanwhile, these communities remain devastatingly poor. Their cultural capital has been translated into economic capital by outsiders with the overhead capital and market skills to buy out and manage the sites. As the 'Long Neck Karen' and 'Big Ear Karen' scenario illustrates, questions of power and empowerment mediate the outcome of tourism development programs even when they are created with the best of intentions (Macleod, Carrier, & Donald, 2010).

Like the 'Long Neck Karen' and 'Big Ear Karen' cultural tourism, volunteer tourism is illustrative of what Michael Dove refers to as the 'big stone, little man' syndrome (Dove, 1994) which suggests that poor people are not poor because they do not have anything to sell. Rather, he argues that they are poor because they are not allowed to be rich in the sense that they are often co-opted by outsiders with access to overhead capital and market skills. In light of the rapid growth and visibility of volunteer tourism in Thailand, it was inevitable that Thailand's tourism officials would take notice and attempt to tap into this emerging market. In 2013, the TAT launched a global digital campaign entitled the 'Little Big Project', the central component of which was an online competition (for ten individuals) to win an all-expenses paid volunteer vacation in Thailand. Relying heavily on the altruistic and humanitarian discourse of many volunteer tourism organizations, the TAT highlighted several volunteer programs throughout Thailand – most of which were facilitated by global volunteer tourism agencies, who also served as sponsors for the campaign – and emphasized that volunteers would be amazed at how so 'little' could make such a 'big' difference.

While there are numerous theoretical contradictions and critiques of the postcolonial and exploitative possibilities of volunteer tourism, it continues to be a source of income for local communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as a way for visitors and members of the local community to interact in a potentially more meaningful and informed manner. As such, we argue that we need to move beyond critique to consider the practical implications of developing more positive volunteer tourism encounters. In what follows, we offer elements of good practice that tourism policy could endorse to contribute to more positive volunteer tourism experiences for both 'hosts' and 'guests'.

- (1) *Develop linguistic competence within the 'host' community.* Prior to inviting volunteer tourists into a host community, host community members should have conversational proficiency in the major language of the volunteer tourists. Without a means to communicate, the touristic space is likely to mimic the colonial exhibition, where presumptions about the cultural other not only go unchallenged, but are further perpetuated.

- (2) *Facilitate cultural learning among volunteer tourists.* An emphasis on what the volunteer tourists can learn from the ‘host community members’ contributes to a more dialogic tourism experience and helps to create a more even atmosphere of exchange rather than that of a ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’. For example, volunteer tourism organizations should consider ways of involving volunteer tourists in the daily routines of host community members in order for tourists to better understand the daily lives of the people with whom they are interacting. This could be an attractive opportunity for volunteer tourists, many of whom would be willing to pay for the experience. Examples of such involvement might include assisting ‘host community members’ in agricultural production, weaving, cooking or other sorts of quotidian activities. Additionally, drawing attention to these types of activities has also been shown to renew interest and pride in activities that are sometimes seen as outdated or mundane in host communities (Medina, 2003).
- (3) *Require that volunteers attend mandatory orientations with a focus on cultural and linguistic competence.* Basic cultural features of the community are often overlooked and create unnecessary embarrassment among both ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’. For example, in Thailand, not touching children on the head or wearing modest clothing are important cultural competencies that should be observed by ‘guests’. Additionally, it is important to discuss with volunteers norms and expectations regarding taking photographs of the ‘hosts’.
- (4) *Inform host community members about the intentions and backgrounds of the volunteer tourists.* While volunteer tourists seek to benefit from the experience through cultural exchanges, it is unclear how much the host community members feel that they participate in the ‘exchange’. In some cases with volunteer tourism in Thailand, the ‘hosts’ are generally given little if any information regarding the intentions of the volunteer tourists, and are therefore less informed about and invested in the volunteer project. This leads to a gap in communication, whereby rumors quickly take on their own logic. It is noted elsewhere how, ‘If volunteer tourism programmes... are not carefully managed, they may lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding and the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes’ (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 530). Filling this information gap will help facilitate a more mutually informed encounter. Empowering local host community members through increased knowledge of the volunteer tourists’ motivations is a necessary step towards a more ethical form of volunteer tourism (Duffy & Smith, 2003). Despite the many programs that do not offer sufficient orientations, many volunteer placement organizations now conduct orientations in which they not only cover important information regarding cultural ‘do’s and don’ts’ but also attempt to temper the expectations of those volunteers who feel that they will be able to ‘save the world’ through their short-term volunteer experience.

The suggestions above are meant as points of departure for rethinking contemporary debates around volunteer tourism as a social and economic development strategy. Organizations that market, sell and arrange volunteer tourism experiences should strive to balance the desires of volunteers for meaningful experiences with the goals of the intended beneficiaries. Additionally, current debates within the industry around the legitimacy of for-profit models need to consider not just the volunteer and local response, but the broader political-economic implications of such

entrepreneurial endeavors such as the ‘big stone, little man’ scenario (Dove, 1994) noted above (Mostafanezhad, 2013). It is likely that volunteer opportunities will increasingly serve as one of many possible tour activities offered by established mass tourism operators in Thailand. With the marketing support of the TAT, we argue that it is increasingly imperative that established and responsible volunteer tourism organizations continue to offer an alternative to the more problematic forms of volunteer tourism that may be on the horizon in Thailand.

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