

Voluntourism and Positive Social Impact

Over the last decade, many of the cataclysmic events that have shaped our global awareness of the economic contribution of the travel industry to destinations have come as a result of its starkly-contrasted absence in the aftermath of devastation. Think of New York following September 11th. Think of Southeast Asia following the tsunami. Think of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. And think of China, Haiti, and Chile following the earthquakes.



Doubtless, in each of these destinations, the economic loss associated with declines in travel and tourism was significant. But, what was not immediately evident, yet has increasingly come to our attention during these past ten years, is the travel industry's growing potential to be the delivery vehicle for direct, social impact that benefits destinations.

Voluntourism, blending voluntary service and travel, has seen notable adoption among travelers and the industry alike since the turn of the millennium. Clearly, the travel industry, through voluntourism, is embarking on a new role, one with which it is not wholly familiar. This is not a reinvention, however; it represents a realization.

Travel in the 21st Century demands experiential authenticity and, therefore, the inclusion of all elements of the destination – be they dark, light, or gray. Today's travelers are seeking a personal encounter with the destination, its people and environment. Passivity is giving way to a requisite of active engagement; only then can a traveler begin to approach satisfaction. And today's destinations – residents and the environment – are demanding a travel industry that is engaged, supportive, and approaching sustainability with an enthusiasm that is equal to that of their own.

In this new role, the travel industry's social impact can indeed be measured in the customary, quantitative manner; nevertheless, the qualitative measurement of such 'intangibles' as goodwill or a deepening of the relationship between traveler and destination, poses a vast opportunity, one that has never been truly explored. It is this very exploration, into a realm of inspiration no less, which may prove to be the most exciting adventure for the travel industry thus far. How do we begin this process?



Certainly, any entity can adopt its own measurement guidelines and ‘accounting’ formulas for social impact. Some have already done so in annual reports on corporate social responsibility and philanthropy. However, most of these reports speak specifically to the financial outlay or in-kind support of philanthropic efforts or NGOs, or they may speak of the direct contributions of employees. With the introduction of travelers into this already-existing mix, not only do we have a new set of quantitative data to consistently measure and track, but we have an opportunity to share unique testimonials, photos, and videos demonstrating the net positive social benefit that can be generated through travel.

Voluntourism is not a public relations campaign for the travel industry; rather, it is a public awareness-raising campaign designed to emphasize the consumer’s role in the advancement of the well-being of destinations. The long-term health and sustainability of destinations across the globe is enhanced by travel that unites social beneficence and net, economic benefit. The travel industry is best-suited to play the role of delivery system and enable travelers to contribute, as effectively and efficiently as possible, to projects aligned with goals and objectives set forth by communities on behalf of residents and/or the environment.



Projects will vary from destination to destination. Some projects will focus on such things as food security, clean water, or micro-enterprise development. Others will conflict with our notions of sustainability: take the recent voluntourist-led effort to build a community theater in Haiti on the outskirts of a tent city. Yet, it was exactly what residents wanted – a place where they can laugh or cry or dance or sing to Hollywood’s finest, and not so fine, creative expressions.

Voluntourism represents the true hospitality and service that is inherently built into the DNA of the travel industry. All we are proposing to do through voluntourism is extrapolate the footprint of this hospitality and service, to extend to consumers the chance to have a reciprocal relationship with destinations. Ultimately, voluntourism affords travelers an opportunity to transform what they receive in the form of art, culture, history, geography and recreation, into what they give back in honor of these priceless gifts.

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