

# ARE WE REALLY HELPING?

Various online and social media campaigns argue that all 'voluntourism' is bad. But what are the facts? **Sam Mittmerham** looks into both the pros and cons in using holidays to do good



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*i. I'm just calling because I'm looking for some more information about helping or aiding*

*the local youths [of the developed world]. I really hear that obesity is a huge problem over there..'*

This is the opening line from *If Voluntourists Talked About North America*, a video made by the End Humanitarian Douchery campaign.

There is no doubt that voluntourism has become a very significant part of the worldwide holiday market, but actual figures are hard to come by. An oft-quoted 2013 Tourism and Research Marketing survey of 300 organisations estimated the market size to be 1.6 million volunteer tourists per year globally, worth approximately £1.3billion. Others have argued that voluntourism over the last decade has seen double digit growth figures and the VolunTourism Institute estimates that voluntourists will cross the ten per cent of all US travellers watershed before the end of the decade. But while being a commercial force to be reckoned with, this growth has come alongside some increasingly strong criticism.

## UNSKILLED LABOUR

UK volunteers can pay upwards of thousands of pounds to undertake short volunteering placements overseas (and often most of this goes to profit-driven tour operators). Although well-intentioned, this can often do more harm than good. Criticisms include volunteer placements preventing local workers from getting much-needed jobs, hard-pressed institutions wasting time looking after them, volunteers often having unfulfilling and disappointing experiences, and abused or abandoned children forming emotional attachments to the visitors, who increase



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their trauma by disappearing back home after a few weeks. Indeed, orphanage voluntourism has been criticised so heavily that Responsible Travel banned all orphanage projects from its website and started a campaign, backed by Tourism Concern (a UK-based non-profit organisation), for tour operators to stop sending unqualified volunteers to orphanages.

So although there are well-respected development charities that arrange for professionals to spend one or two years overseas, many of the volunteering placements being offered by commercial operators are little more than expensive holidays that add little or no value to the supposed beneficiaries. Other criticisms, in the media and academia, argue that voluntourism is rooted in neo-colonial values and

'Orientalism', that is, the West's patronising perceptions and fictional depictions of the East in particular, or anything 'foreign' in general.

Overall the tenor in the media and academia over recent years has been that short-term and unskilled voluntourism in humanitarian projects is not the way forward. Pippa Biddle, a white American in her twenties, put the case succinctly in a blog that went viral in 2014, with over two million views (see footnote).

*Scam operators can see volunteers unwittingly raising wild animals for hunt purposes*

## WHERE VOLUNTOURISM WORKS

Unskilled, short-term humanitarian volunteering in the developing world is seen as bad. But are there forms of voluntourism that can actually do good? Or, as the End Humanitarian Douchery campaign purports, is it all bad news? The clues are in the words 'humanitarian' and 'unskilled'. Volunteering can, in fact, work in areas where there are no special skills needed, local labour cannot be used instead and long-term time input is not critical. This is where citizen science plays a part, especially in wildlife conservation or archaeological digs, where short-term, unskilled labour that is not readily available locally comes in very handy, especially if that labour also comes with funding as voluntourists part-finance the projects through their fees.

Scientific literature often highlights situations where voluntourists have contributed



significantly to science projects. A study by the University of Newcastle investigated the use of lay people to collect marine data in Cumbrae, Scotland. The authors assert that 'much of this type of research is labour-intensive but technically straightforward and volunteers could make significant contributions to it in the future.' Further, and remarkably, it also claims that '(data) generated from them [volunteers] were almost identical to those produced... by an experienced scientist.'

A similar study by Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit yielded much the same conclusions: '...the study has found that people from all walks of life, with all levels of previous involvement with field ecology, from novice to expert, have something to offer to conservation... The results collected by the amateur naturalist teams proved very reliable when compared to more complex monitoring techniques used by professional researchers at Wytham Woods.'

Proponents of the citizen science/voluntourism model argue that there is often no alternative to these boots on the ground, and furthermore that voluntourists bring a second crucial ingredient: funding. With government and other public money for conservation being slashed across the board, private initiatives are becoming increasingly important, if not vital, in conservation. And these private initiatives include voluntourists who pay fees to participate.

## CAREFUL PLANNING

But care is needed with conservation voluntourism. The word 'science' is key here. When considering a volunteer stint, it is vitally important to look carefully at the science behind the project. Is there any? What are the results? The rise of voluntourism has seen a bandwagon of charlatans appear on the scene,

*Volunteer trips are increasingly coming under fire for doing more harm to local lives than good*

ethical non-profit or charity operator.

## PIPPA BIDDLE'S STORY

*'It turns out that I, a little white girl, am good at a lot of things. I am good at raising money, training volunteers, collecting items, coordinating programs, and telling stories. I am flexible, creative, and able to think on my feet. On paper I am, by most people's standards, highly qualified to do international aid. But I shouldn't be. I am not a teacher, a doctor, a carpenter, a scientist, an engineer, or any other professional that could provide concrete support and long-term solutions to communities in developing countries. I am a 5'4" white girl who can carry bags of moderately heavy stuff, horse around with kids, attempt to teach a class, tell the story of how I found myself to a few thousand people and not much else.'*

## USEFUL LINKS

[www.tourismconcern.org.uk/volunteer](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/volunteer)

A page by respected UK charity Tourism Concern about volunteering, including a useful briefing paper and guidelines.

[www.biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips)

Tips on how to avoid the charlatans in conservation volunteering and good examples of how voluntourism in wildlife conservation can work well.

[endhumanitariandouchery.co.nf](http://endhumanitariandouchery.co.nf)

A campaign that does not mince its words when arguing that all voluntourism is bad.