Paintbrushes to Pruners: Tourism Professionals with a Purpose

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Introduction

Volunteer tourism research has studied individual motives to participating in development work overseas (Knollenberg, McGehee, Boley & Clemmons, 2014; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). There is, however, an absence of research examining what influences corporate or individual employees to volunteer for tourism related activities as ambassadors or representatives of their organization within their own country. The purpose of this phenomenological research study, based on the concept of the common good, is to discover tourism professionals' purpose(s) for engaging in tourism centered volunteer tourism opportunities. Further, the study aims to compare motives by tourism professionals with motives of volunteer tourists as reported in previous research. This study was designed to answer the following research questions: Why do tourism professionals volunteer for a tourism-centered philanthropic organization? In what ways do individual employees view how themselves, their organizations, and the local community benefit from employees volunteering for a tourism specific philanthropic event?

Literature Review

A review of literature of why tourism professionals may be motivated to volunteer within the field of tourism, and the individual or societal benefits derived, was conducted in two stages. First, literature was reviewed to formulate interview questions, and to guide axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Second, an on-going literature review determined how interview themes were either congruent to or divergent from the review. The literature review uncovered three key themes that have linkages to the common good approach.

Personal. Literature suggests the most common motives for traveling are related to "push" or "pull" factors (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Push factors are internal forces moting a traveler to seek an experience, whereas pull factors relate to destination attractiveness. Volunteer or "voluntour" motives are similar to traveler motives in areas such as: altruism (Wearing & McGehee, 2013), escapism (Knollenberg et. al., 2014), and reasons for self-growth through educational enhancement (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer & Benckendorff, 2011), or cross-cultural understanding (Holmes, 2014; Raymond & Hall, 2008). A personal reason to volunteer may also be to enhance an individual's sense of wellbeing (Monga, 2006; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

Relationship Building. Some additional motives to volunteer are to build relationships with family and friends (Knollenberg et. al., 2014; Monga, 2006), and to connect with community members (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005, Zahra & McGehee, 2013). At the corporate level, volunteering may strengthen stakeholder relationships through collective employee-volunteer programs (De Gilder, Schuyt & Breedjik, 2005).

Social Responsibility. Community wellbeing (Nicolau, 2008; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), building social capital (Muthuri, Matten & Moon, 2009, Zahra & McGehee, 2013), and impacts related to development and management of tourism destination communities (Guttentag, 2009; Nicolau, 2008) are elements related to social responsibility to volunteer. It also extends to the sustainability of the environment (Buckley, 2012; Hacking & Guthrie, 2008), cultural or social needs of the people (Buckley, 2012; Lui, 2003), and to a destination's economy (Nicolau, 2008). Finally, social responsibility can relate to company reputation if it is known as a socially responsible organization (Bénabou & Tirole, 2010; De Gilder et, al., 2005).

Methods

To study volunteer tourism, the three researchers chose to work with Tourism Cares (TC), a nonprofit organization supporting tourism industry education and community building. An interpretive phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) was selected to examine the phenomenon of tourism professionals' volunteering in a multi-day philanthropic event. Since 2003, Tourism Cares has organized annual "giveback" programs in the U.S. allowing individuals and companies to volunteer in their field of work. In 2015-16, TC selected U.S. National Parks and gateway communities as volunteer sites to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the National Park Service.

The first event of a series of five took place November 1-3, 2015, and was held in Williams, Arizona and a nearby National Forest (volunteer day number one), and in the Grand Canyon National Park (volunteer day two). The work ranged from building maintenance to vegetation removal. The three-day event drew over 140 tourism professionals from small companies to large national brands from across the USA. Participation in TC events varied. Some firms sent teams of employees who were participating for their first time, while others sent individuals who had participated in events since the philanthropic organization's inception.

Based on the review of literature, an interview protocol was created. The interviewers conducted an average of eight 5 to 15 minute interviews each over a period of two days. Although the abbreviated interviews could be considered a limitation for the study, they were recorded and/or notes scribed for each conversation. Eleven females and eleven males consisting of predominately white middle class individuals were interviewed, with a total of 23 interviews attempted (one was eliminated due to less relevant interviewee responses). Two interviewers listened to the tapes and/or reviewed interviewer notes to ensure accurate representation of the data. Qualitative data analysis techniques were applied with open and axial coding. Themes emerged from this process that allowed for deep consideration of the data and how it was interpreted.

Results

A total of three major themes related to tourism professionals' motives to participate in a tourism related volunteer opportunity were evident in interview data that either concur or differ from literature themes.

Personal. Several tourism professionals' personal reasons for volunteering aligned with motives evident in previous research such as educational fulfillment, escape daily life, experience a new culture or to "give back" to society for altruistic reasons. However, other motives differed. A number came to "experience something first hand, [so] you are better to explain it, and tell people about it," or as in the case of a host industry member, the event was a way to expose "our hotel and our property." Others said it was important to promote a "feeder" location to a well-known tourist attraction because "sometimes the Parks get all the recognition and the volunteerism, and the support communities don't." One volunteer came because she felt personally attached to the location having lived in the state before. Finally, because this was a national volunteering event, which differs from volunteer tourism research that primarily focuses on international volunteering (Wearing & McGehee, 2013), convenience of location was another reason why some volunteers chose to be there.

Relationship Building. As volunteer tourism literature indicates, a major purpose for participating in volunteer opportunities may be to build relationships. For tourism professional participants this differed slightly from literature as many came to network and "meet like-minded tourism professionals from all over the country." One specifically mentioned he came to meet "people who you don't know, who are grateful for what you are doing for their community." A company CEO who was interviewed encourages employees to participate because it "sends a great message. We work to have hundreds of our employees over time have this experience." This last statement concurs with research studies on the benefits of employee volunteering programs (De Gilder, Schuyt & Breedjik, 2005)

Social Responsibility. Several interviewees were motivated to volunteer because the philanthropic organization "really cares where they take people." Another said they wanted to participate because TC members were known to "actually do work." Both of these comments relate to the importance of minimizing the negative impacts of volunteer tourism (Guttentag, 2009). Some interviewees were moted to participate to boost company reputation with their own employees or stakeholders (De Gilder et, al., 2005). Others seem to suggest they wanted the general public or other industry members to know they socially responsible as noted in Bénabou and Tirole (2010) and De Gilder et, al. (2005).

Almost all interviewees vocalized the primary reason to volunteer was to "give back" to destination sustainability. This reason appears in a multitude of volunteer tourism and sustainable tourism research studies. However, for tourism professionals this differs from literature in that they were volunteering to preserve the destination to "support tourism and the sustainability of it." Besides volunteering because it is the socially responsible thing to do, this is their industry and their livelihood depends on maintaining communities and attractions they send clients to.

Discussion and Conclusion

It became evident through this study that tourism professional motives to participate in a tourism-related volunteer project are similar to studies on volunteer or volunteer tourist motives, individual or corporate social responsibility, and sustainable tourism. Motives such as altruism, knowledge acquisition, escape daily life, build relationships, as well as self-interested motives, were evident in both tourism professional responses and literature. Volunteering because of concern for destination sustainability was a reoccurring theme in literature and interviews as well.

Aspects that differed in this study from previous research were tourism professionals volunteered to experience the destination for promotional reasons, network with "like-minded" professionals, and associate with a reputable philanthropic organization. The biggest difference between academic literature and interviewee responses is tourism professional volunteers believe the tourism industry has a social responsibility to "give back" to industry-related social needs in destination communities. This sentiment is closely related to the common good approach (Garriga & Mele, 2004), one of several corporate social responsibility stakeholder theories that suggest business "has to contribute to the common good because it is part of society" (p. 62). Tourism professional motives may be slightly different which is a primary contribution to existing research. TC is a rare example of industry (mostly non-local) providing labor and resources to enhance the tourism product, which has an impact on the livelihood of tourism professionals and their companies. Study implications can be beneficial for employee-volunteer

management and business ethics, as well as contribution to corporate social responsibility, sustainable tourism, and volunteer tourism research.

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