

## **RAISING AWARENESS OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM: EXPERIENCING THE VOLUNTEER TOURISM AMONG STUDENTS AND YOUNG RESEARCHERS**

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**Abstract:** The volunteering covers those activities which, generally, took place locally, without involving a long trip outside the locality, having no leisure arrangements. Volunteer tourism is conceptualized as a form of alternative experience. The study explores the intention of students and young researchers in volunteer tourism activities, seen as alternative experience where the scientific knowledge and leisure activity are associated. The analyse reveals a significant relationship between the research activity and the active participation of volunteer tourism and is better known by the researchers or individuals having different hobbies on sustainable environment issues.

**Key words:** volunteer tourism, raising awareness, tourism geography, students and young researchers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The world is in a continuous transformation and also the economy. As a part of the economy, the tourism expands and adapts according to the demands of travellers. Tourism could damage the local culture and the environment. Underlying an anthropological critique of tourism, Sheperd (2002) claims that tourism brings dangers

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because it corrupts culture; it transforms what has been sacred into the merely profane; it cheapens the ritualistic, transforming what was authentic into spectacle. The emergence of “*New Moral Tourism*” (Butcher & Smith, 2010) attempting to minimise the negative outcomes of mass tourism, within volunteer tourism, have currently changed the relationships of the international volunteering. However, the interests of tourists for folk traditions, customs, architecture and well being of local communities, interweave with the desire to involve either financial or leisure time in volunteering, mainly for protection and preservation of culture or the environment. These have contributed, in time, of rising to “*the (eco)tourism’s niche, called “voluntourism”*” (Bud, 2008), probably a mot-valise, especially constructed for media and advertising’s web-sites.

“*Volunteer tourism can be associated with a post-Fordist shift in tourism, where Westerners desire something different than the usual mass tourism packages*” (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). However, Ellis (2003) argues that mass tourism model adopted by the volunteer tourism is due to its success and popularity. Recently, in its multilayered forms, the volunteer tourism became a business for many tour-operators or labelled environmental associations like NGOs; other researches claimed that the “*monetary gain is inappropriate in the world of the benevolent intentions*” (Tomazos & Cooper, 2012) and raised questions on the transparency of proceedings in terms of profit distribution.

Web Media promote the “*volunteer tourism*” like a combination of words between volunteering and tourism, which integrates the best of a travel experience: art, culture, geography, heritage sites, natural environment, recreation; the ability to add extra value in tourist destination; to support local people and nature.

Volunteer tourism was born inside many NGOs (McMillon et al., 2009), but, starting with 1990, the tourism industry created a niche for people who like volunteer activities with new offers: volunteer vacations, volunteer travels. In the last two decades, studies and research enlarged its definition and comprehension of this phenomenon. Thus, Wearing (2001:1) states that volunteer tourism is specific for “*those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in the society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment*”. As a new concept and new form of tourism, the volunteer tourism is recognized to make a significant contribution in promoting and developing what is intended to be a sustainable tourism. Volunteer tourism is considered new form of ethical tourism that growing in popularity, being related on “*social consciousness and cross cultural understandings*” (Raymond & Hall, 2008). McGehee and Santos (2005), enhancing the responsibility of care, define volunteer tourism as “*utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need*”.

While tourists, generally speaking, desire rests, knowing culture or rebuild their healthy, the volunteer tourists are those who for various reasons choose to spend their holiday or free time in an organized way, engaged in various activities aimed at supporting especially poor communities, alleviation of poverty, rehabilitation of certain areas, mainly protected ones, or investigating certain aspects of society or the environment, delivering a particular type of free service to a destination.

The declaration of 2001 as “*International Year of Volunteers*” stimulated the promotion of the tourism niche, especially in the communities of the developed countries, which generated tourists and the emergence of new destinations for volunteer tourism in Ecuador, Costa Rica, Ghana, Honduras, Guatemala, India etc. and surprisingly some developed countries like Italy and United Kingdom (Novelli, 2005). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2011) pays attention to this form of tourism, making it a subject for stakeholders or projects likes “*Planeterra*”, which aim is to elaborate the guidelines for volunteer tourism.

Despite the novelty of this activity, the volunteer tourism has had a numerous nature-conservation oriented activities or educating consumers from outdoor to indoor (museums) because the benefits of volunteering are perceived as a positive attitude towards preservation or safety into heritage sites (Millar, 1994). Furthermore, companies interested in volunteer tourism are coping with stimulation or commitment upon helping others, but, also, making a profit.

In fact, who are the volunteer tourists? Do they belong to a specific cultural pattern? Which are their reasons to do it? The segment of pinning for volunteer tourism is not large because tourists want to escape from work or stress and enjoy leisure. Moreover, in many countries volunteering is a use as a form for punishment (Asner, 2006). To a better understanding its implications, studies and researches particularly focused on the benefits of volunteer tourism. Some find gains for participants including learning about cultures, places, changes in lifestyle (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007) and spreading peace and friendship over the world.

The volunteer tourist's profile was analyzed in many papers. Wearing (2001), Zahra and McIntosh (2007) underline the altruism as a primarily feature, while Brown and Morrison (2003) say that the desire to help others. Brown and Lehto's (2005) found four main characteristics for tourists' motivations: "*cultural immersion, giving back and making a difference, seeking camaraderie with fellow volunteers, ending with family bonding and education*".

Others authors highlighted the sustainability of it and the need of developing countries to be helped (Anderson, 2007). Other studies point out the business interests, the impact of transportation upon the environment (air pollution), changes induced in the host communities, the superficiality of helps (Mustonen, 2006) etc. Related to the motivation, there are many motivations "*more a desire to travel than to contribute or volunteer*" (Sin, 2009:497), or the desire "*to make a difference*" (Butcher & Smith, 2010: 33).

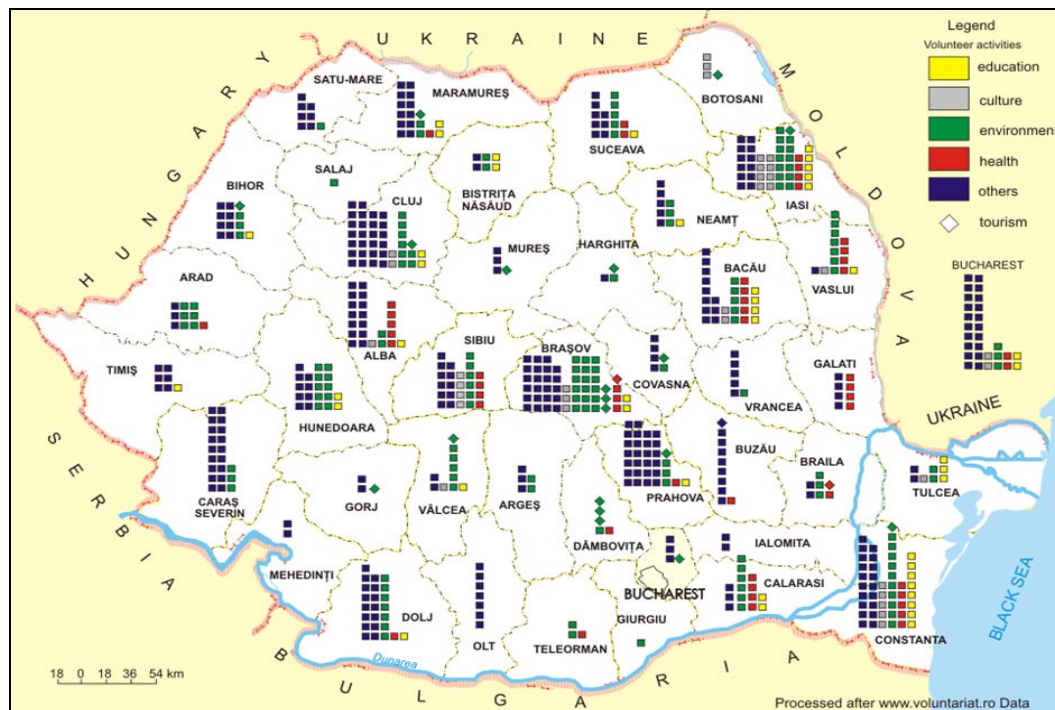
### **THE VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN ROMANIA: SHARING EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL VALUES, AS PRACTICAL DISCOURSE**

As a country belonging to the former communist area, Romania can be used to draw a pattern for volunteer tourism in the area. Firstly, there is confusion between volunteer tourism and volunteering, the latter one being rejected by the adult population, which about 20 years ago, was involved in raising patriotism activities consisting of agricultural labour, forest restoration, scrap collection, etc. During the post-communist period, Romania became a destination for volunteering and volunteer tourism. Thus, it can be mentioned: "*Médecins Sans Frontières*" which has helped until 2004 the restoration of health in the most vulnerable groups both in rural and urban areas or "*Opération Villages Romains*" started before 1990 with many outputs among tourism activities of villages.

Subsequently, part of the Romanian society felt the need of organizing and directing groups to solve problems outside the political classes who were in setting up, at which point the NGOs appeared. Most of these NGOs migrated or are based on volunteering and hence there is a step to volunteer tourism for those involved in restoration marks, trails and tourist facilities, tourist waste collection; tourist information; monitoring tourist flow, collection of scientific information on flora and fauna, training and work-shops with local community members, renovation and refurbishment of ethno-cultural targets of interest etc.

In Romania, the volunteer tourism is a challenging topic on the tourism market, and it is appropriate to the NGOs projects. On one, side, Romania has a network of volunteers which has subscribed to the European events since 1997, organizing many activities (charity, health education or aids, promoting culture, restoring the environment

of different sites) and on the other side the volunteer tourism organized by NGOs with ecological profile in partnership with National Forests Administration, Protected Areas Directions (Figure 1.). The target groups are teenagers, pupils and students and the leading activities are restoration of tourists' routes, collecting litter made by tourists, tourism monitoring, workshops with local communities, collecting information about traditions, plants and flora, artefacts etc.



**Figure 1.** The volunteer activities in 2011, dedicated to the Volunteering Year in European Union (Each unit represent an action) Source: voluntariat.ro

The Romanian volunteer tourist's motivation does not much differ from the global pattern. Some tourists stress the idea of winning self-esteem and working in team building training etc. In the context of declaring 2011 as *'European Year of Volunteers'*, this exploratory study aims to analyze the current state of practice of the volunteer tourism among students and young researchers and to assert the premises in the perspectives of this new form of tourism.

Many of the activities promoted by associations and NGOs on volunteer tourism assume that the notion of volunteering is well understood by the community or people who want to participate in these activities. Despite its ambiguous attributes and clichés ideas, the volunteer tourism is a separate type of contemporary tourism. The invention of a new expression like *"voluntourism"* is rather associated with the media. The sign/signifier of volunteer tourism reflects the changing relations of meanings and the hegemony of social reproduction and representation; the volunteer tourism is rather deconstructed, being differently perceived by all the social actors. Language, imagery and discourse used by these organizations are keen to reveal the participatory tourism approach (free visits and contact with locals, sharing experiences, attitudes, customs and values) or are emphasizing the socially responsible activities dimension, targeted by multinationals companies (e.g. cleaning and greening activities such as *Let's Do It Romania*).

The language is mandatory, usually attractive, combining both the activity itself and the location (e.g. Let's go to the sea to and let's go brush! Volunteer!). The main message is often assigned to the location; the geography plays a crucial role: an attractive geographical space gives it the impression of relaxation, euphoria and ludic activities related on tourism. Thus, the 'core' concept of 'play' is a 'tool for the analysis of the media experience (Silverstone, 1999). The second part of the message is centred on the work itself, the volunteering, mainly associated with mandatory attributes: Volunteer! Culture plays a vital role in tourism activities, including the volunteer tourism. Although at first glance, the volunteering activity is associated with a controlled activity, raising awareness, knowledge-based, non invasive, and even neutral, aiming at preserving the cultural and natural surroundings, the volunteer tourism is still speculated these cultural values and counting on selling tourism products. Thus, all things [including cultural productions] can be commodities, at a "certain phase in their careers and in a particular context" (Appadurai, 1986:16).

It also relies on experience and shared-experience; the inter-cultural exchanges between the people involved and community members concerned are more beneficial. "The volunteer tourists often interact with locals intensively with hosts and project their caring behaviours towards individuals in host-communities" (Sin, 2010).

The opportunities and the oriented skilled gained on conducting such activities are even highlighted. Thus, experience and cultural values become commodities and the initiators are counting on the success of their business. So, those volunteers can become tourists involved into cultural and historical representations of the host community. They are tourists gaze. Gazing as a tourist means "to insert oneself within a historical process and to consume signs or markers of particular histories. Different tourist gazes involve particular processes by which the collective memory of a society is organized and reproduced" (Urry, 1992:185).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The objectives of this exploratory study consist in drawing a general perception on volunteer tourism' activities among students and young researchers, to analyze the motivational factors within volunteer tourism' activities and the particularly reasons to practice this type of tourism activities. We assume that volunteer tourism activities is an alternative experience where the scientific knowledge and leisure activity are associated; the scientific research and the active participation of young researchers and students are correlated with a sustainable environment knowledge, behaviour and education.

The validity of any research is based on the systematic method of data collection and analysis. The present study used both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected from 150 respondents. For the first-hand information, respondents were chosen by convenient sampling method. The secondary data were collected from leading journals, magazines and websites relating to the tourism activities, particularly on volunteer tourism activities among it can be mentioned: TIES, and data base of voluntariat.ro etc.

Considering that the volunteer tourism activity is based on social networking, we have applied an online survey in January in 2012 to the students of Geography of University of Bucharest as well to young researchers. Taking into consideration the level of non answers, we have been able to valid only 100 questionnaires.

The questionnaire was focused on the awareness of volunteering tourism notion among the target population (graduated high school, especially scientists or/and social sciences field), the interest for the volunteer tourism in Romania, the intention to participate to the volunteer tourism activities, the information specific resource through social networking and the chance of Romania as a destination for volunteer tourism. The results were processed in statistical software SPSS v17© program.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Researchers (Tomazos, 2010; Wight, 2003) emphasize the confusion that often occurs between what we call volunteer activity, volunteer tourism and marketing. The volunteering covers those activities which, generally, took place locally, without involving a long trip outside the locality, especially without leisure arrangements. There is some paradox here that the volunteer tourism is quite understood as an absence of pay and the people involved usually pay for this combination of business and pleasure (Ellis, 2003; Tomazo & Butler, 2009). The study shows that only a truly motivated and convinced tourist about the importance for the community or a natural ecosystem, and willing to bear the costs of subsistence may be considered a volunteer tourist.

The 100 students and young researchers comprise 58% females and 42% males. 65% were undergraduate students and 35% young researchers. Ages were ranged from 23 and under and 23-40. The target groups were students and the young researchers because of their specific formation in tourism activities and academic focus on environmental issues. The significance for the volunteer tourism term is known by almost of young people (less than 40 years old) which are interest in, too. The range of their activities comprises both institutional volunteer actions and tourism related events.

They have been involved in volunteer activities as the following: 14% in guiding activities, scientific research (11%), 9% as rangers in mountain areas, social assistance (6%), 4% in mountain or marine rescue, 6% instructors in summer schools, and 19 % other activities (cleaning the environment, promotion and youth camps etc). Almost 31% did not practice either volunteer's activities or volunteer tourism. The guiding activities are more familiar to students in geography, mostly due of their experience and performance within the mountains guides activities schools.

The corroboration of these facts with their source for information underlines that the main channel is the Internet (45%), then educational institutions (33%), networking of family and friends (22%). Due to the high cost of promotion via advertising in media or by fliers, these pathways are almost neglected.

The degree of satisfaction for these activities is low, 34% being satisfied and only 18% extremely satisfied. Their motivations do not largely differ in comparison with the well known volunteer's reasons: 'to pursue a hobby, meeting of like-minded people, offering their services to a community, adding value to their own knowledge' (Millar, 1994). Even it has low promotion, the success and the future of volunteer tourism is viewed with generalized scepticism: 30% considered that Romania has few chances to develop volunteer tourism, 53 % moderate chances while 17% from them are decidedly optimistic, declaring that Romania could have high chances in developing volunteer tourism activities.

Viewed both as an alternative tourism and either as an ethical tourism form, the volunteer activity is better known by the researchers or individuals having different hobbies on sustainable environment issues; therefore, the educational level is particularly valuable. A significant relationship was found between level of education and participation in volunteering activities ( $\chi^2 = 4.91$ , df 2,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, there was no significant relationship between level income and participation in volunteer tourism activities ( $\chi^2 = 5.20$ , df 2,  $p < 0.05$ ), as well as between the age of the respondent and the familiarity of notion about "volunteer tourism" ( $\chi^2 = 0.61$ , df 1,  $p < 0.05$ ). (35% of respondents declared that they have been participating on volunteer tourism activities, 65% they not).

The activity of young researchers is often related to the natural environment and the practice of volunteer tourism activities. Volunteer tourism has been conceptualized as a form of alternative experience that moves the tourist beyond simply visiting or "passing

through” a place as an ‘outsider’ (Lyons et al., 2012: 368). It could be seen as alternative experience where the scientific knowledge and leisure activity are associated.

However, particularly for the young researchers, the participation to volunteer tourism activity is viewed as an important factor in raising consciousness of responsibility of tourism activities and awareness of young people of a better involvement into life community. There was found a significant relationship between the research activity and the active participation of volunteer tourism ( $\chi^2=16.98$ , df 1,  $p < 0.00$ ) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Chi-square Test

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square <sup>1</sup>	16,982a	1	,000		
Continuity Correction <sup>2</sup>	14,333	1	,000		
Likelihood Ratio	17,091	1	,000		
Fisher's Exact Test				,000	,000
Linear-by-Linear Association	16,812	1	,000		
N of Valid Cases	100				
1. 1 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3,85					
2. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

The involvement into life community represents a push factor. The projects of social assistance among young students are very important. They are motivated to participate on social assistance projects. A significant relationship between the intention to participate to volunteer tourism activities and the social assistance projects was found ( $\chi^2 =11.85$ , df 1,  $p < 0.01$ ). The willingness to participate to further projects on volunteer tourism activities is seen as very attractive one (68% in my own country, 28% abroad and 4% are not yet decided). We have found a significant relationship between the participation on further projects and the income level ( $\chi^2 =13.37$ , df 6,  $p < 0.02$ ).

The willingness to participate in volunteer tourism activities can be interpreted in terms of “*tourist gaze*” (Urry, 2002:2), where the role of the visual nature and the gained experience are essential because “*these experiences are only of importance to the tourist because they are located within a distinctive visual environment*”.

The results revealed some interesting insights into how university students view and practice the volunteer tourism activities. Students and young researchers awareness of volunteer tourism could be linked in general with specific knowledge in tourism geography and a greater experience with applied projects on sustainable issues ( $\chi^2 =12.09$ , df 2,  $p < 0.02$ ).

The scientific knowledge and experience play a key role in the awareness of volunteer tourism activities. Due to their advanced knowledge and practice in volunteer tourism issues, the young researchers are better and active involved in and may be agents and promoters of NGOs activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research highlighted the importance of volunteer tourism activities among students and young researchers. The volunteer tourist’s profile is almost similar with the global type: friendly, altruist, responsible, devoted, educated, adaptable with initiative; attracted by novelty experiences in genuine places; care people and nature; non-dependent of urban comfort; courageous; with communication abilities and having good physical condition.

Motivations to adhere at this form of tourism have at the base the desire to keep the environment clean, to rebuild the tourist patches, help local communities and at top

continuous learning and scientific research. Their choice is related to several factors among them: free time, education, information, age and less financial status or experience. In this study, many of the individuals do not necessarily see themselves as „volunteer tourists” per se, but they described the activity as „experience”, „cultural-shared experience”, and „human practice in relation with knowledge”.

Volunteer tourism activities can be found as manifestations of the (hyper)consumption society: bio-products, sustainable development, industrial ecosystem: „the ecology is no longer counter force to a market economy, it operates as a means of recycling them, as a vector of a more respectful offer of the great balance in nature” (Lipovetsky, 2007). In Romania, the volunteer tourism is still not on the market due to the legacy of Communist regime, when volunteerism was largely spread through the specific organizations, being a support for socialist politics and the main force of some NGOs to attract funds on this purpose.

All stakeholders, policy makers and civil society can contribute to enhancing awareness of voluntary activities involving several forms of tourism, including ecotourism. However, „ecotourism is aimed primarily at conservation and education of tourists in terms of protecting and preserving the environment” (National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, I, 2009). In fact, there are so many directions and strategies that underline this: tourists’ education, measures to support current business visitor centers, „by creating partnerships to conduct joint activities with NGOs, voluntary support as the residents and owners of second residence in local communities in which it operates, sponsorship, establishing partnerships” (National Strategy for Ecotourism Development in Romania, 2009).

The individuals could be mobilized and inclined to activism and responsible activities, but they must be aware of social impacts (McGehee & Norman, 2002). The raising consciousness experience could be obtained on social networking, education programs, and NGOs activities. It is needed to create a greater awareness of the value of community involvement as a significant part of students’ education. The volunteer tourism is a form of contemporary tourism that allows the empowering of the local community; further researches need to highlight how this ‘altruistic tourism’ is perceived by the host local community and labelled environmental associations.

This study has its own limits. The survey methodology didn’t allow the collection of details regarding the behaviour of volunteer tourist, and the study’s results cannot be generalized due to the low size of the sample. Additional studies, based on qualitative research methods, for the volunteer tourist’s profile could be done in the future.

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