
Third cultured volunteer tourists and the process of re-assimilation into home environments

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ABSTRACT

With so many people partaking in volunteering activities around the world, it is likely that some of these tourists will experience a clash of cultures and ideals as they struggle to reconcile all they have learned in their host community with that which they are expected to follow in their home communities. This article examines volunteer tourism against the larger backdrop of ecotourism and the traditionally recognised mass tourism models to understand why this phenomenon is so important to the tourist experiences of volunteer tourists. It then examines the phenomena of biculturalism and third-culturalism as they pertain to reverse culture shock in volunteer tourists. Finally recommendations are made as to what is necessary for a volunteer tourist to be able to reintegrate back into their home culture upon their return.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer tourism is a phenomenon that is growing each year as slowly more and more people are becoming aware of the possibility of spending their holiday and/or leisure time helping those less fortunate than themselves. This can be for altruistic reasons, but there are many other motivating factors at play as well, such as improving career prospects, not wanting to be seen as a tourist, or just the fact that these tourists are affluent or fortunate enough to be able to partake in such an experience.

In an age where tourism is endemic in modern westernised societies, it seems that tourism stands to offer the most economic benefits to developing nations. Yet against this backdrop of economic inflows and out-flows, it seems that very few people really stop to consider the possibilities offered to developing nations by alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism and volunteer tourism. The experiences that a volunteer tourist may undergo have the possibility to change their entire perceptions

of the nature of the world we live in, yet, despite the relatively large amount of research available on the culture shock they might receive upon their arrival into their new environment, there is very little information available that discusses the process of cultural readjustment that most volunteer tourists undergo upon their return to their home culture (Coschignano 2000).

In 1999 alone more than 500,000 travellers volunteered, and after the events of 11 September 2001, there was a surge in the recognition of the value of volunteering (McMillon, Cutchins & Geissinger 2003). Participants on volunteer vacations are finding a change in their perspective on the world, learning new skills and greatly impacting the lives of others. They also find that their vacations benefit themselves at least as much as they do the people being served (Wearing 2001). In the United States a broad variety of organisations offer volunteer vacations. They vary from tour operators to non-profit organisations. One

of the longest published guides to these organisations, *Volunteer vacations* by Bill McMillon, listed only 75 such organisations in its first edition in 1987 (Campbell 1999). In its newest edition, published in 2003, there were approximately 275 organisations. Types of projects for volunteers vary widely and include agriculture, archaeology, community development, conservation, construction, education and teaching, environmental protection and research, technical assistance, historic preservation, medical and dental, and work camps (Wearing 2004).

VOLUNTEER TOURISM VERSUS TRADITIONAL TOURISM

Tourism is a very broad term that encompasses many different activities, and serves many different purposes for many different people. Stear (2002, p. 14) defines tourism itself as:

...travel and temporary stay, involving at least one night away from the region of a person's usual domicile which is undertaken with the major expectation of satisfying leisure, pleasure or recreational needs which are perceived as being better able to be satisfied outside the region of their domicile.

Whilst this definition is a clear and easily understood conceptualisation of the phenomenon of tourism, it does not in any way allow the reader to visualise the wide variety of different activities that could be encompassed by this definition. In this way it is possible for such destructive activities as 4WD tours on Fraser Island to be considered in the same league as the activities of those who volunteer in remote and underprivileged societies in order to try to improve some aspect of life for the local communities in which they work. It is for this reason that it is necessary to conceptualise and define what 'volunteer tourism' is, and why it is important to study it as an adjunct to more industrialised forms of tourism.

Stear (2002) has devised a framework to which he claims all parts and types of the tourism industry can be applied, yet generally speaking, Stear's model of 'highly industrialised tourism' does not really account for the phenomenon of ecotourism or volunteer tourism at all. This is due simply to the fact that most volunteer tourists participate in the tourism industry

in a vast number of ways that cannot be easily measured and quantified by a schema such as Stear's. This can be qualified by examining and comparing the two types of tourist phenomenon in detail to understand the differences between them. An example of such a difference is that whilst most industrialised tourists choose to participate in tourism usually for general leisure and pleasure purposes (Stear 2002), most volunteer tourists choose to participate in tourism to contribute to the improvement of a natural and/or naturally significant area or community. There may be some similarities between highly industrialised tourists and volunteer tourists, such as using the carrier sector of the tourism industry in order to arrive at their destination, but these similarities are largely superficial.

Due to the conceptual difference between 'highly industrialised tourism' and 'volunteer tourism', it has been decided that Mieczkowski's 'alternative tourism schema', as seen in Figure 1, is a more appropriate conceptual framework for this discussion. In this schema, Stear's model of highly industrialised tourism fits into the box labelled 'mass tourism', whereas the idea of volunteer tourism is mainly concerned with the ideas and concepts related to the 'nature tourism or ecotourism' box (see Figure 1).

Before further discussion is possible it is necessary to explain what volunteer tourism is exactly and to understand this it must be seen as a facet of the less specific classification, 'ecotourism'. It is therefore vital to this discussion that the term ecotourism be defined, especially as many different stakeholders use the term to suit their own specific purposes. By defining ecotourism as a concept, it then becomes possible to understand various aspects of the issues being discussed, and their relevance to this often misunderstood archetype of sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism is a term generally used to describe tourist activities that are conducted in such a way that they are considered to be 'harmonious' with the natural resources in an area. It is a term that has been conceptualised very differently according to the motivations of the individual, and can be considered synonymous with many different brands of tourist activity, including nature tourism, responsible tourism, green tourism, or soft tourism (Wight 1993).

Ryel and Grasse (1991) emphasise culture

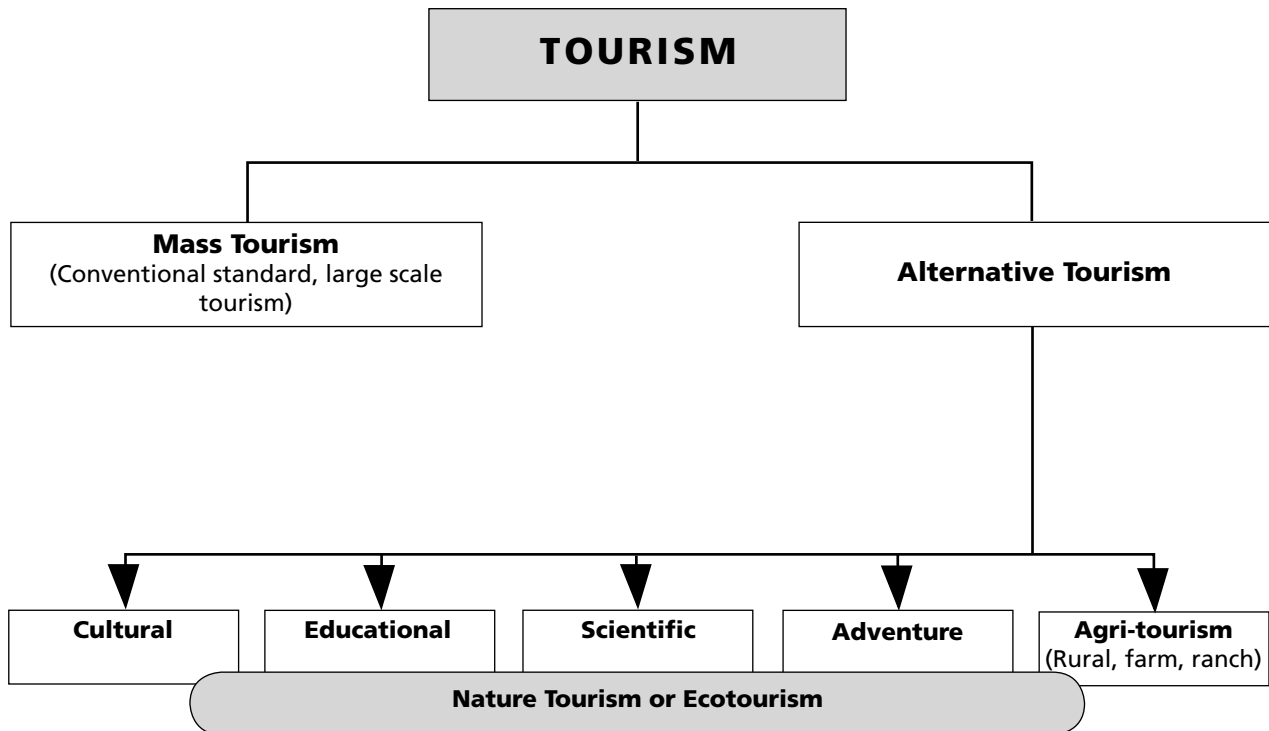


Figure 1; Conceptual map of alternative tourism
(After Mieczkowski, 1995: 459)

and nature in their classification of ecotourism as purposeful travel that creates an understanding of natural and cultural history. They extend on this concept by adding that this travel must also simultaneously safeguard the integrity of the ecosystem and produce economic benefits that encourage conservation. This definition is furthered by Hawkins and Khan (2001, p. 192), who state that ecotourism is 'travel to natural areas, to learn about host communities, at the same time providing economic opportunities that work toward conservation and preservation of the ecosystem...' From this they extend their definition, and state that ecotourism must '...advocate practises that are environmentally conscious, and that work toward more sustainable development.'

This definition is holistic in its approach to the problem of defining the concept of ecotourism, for not only does it describe the processes involved in ecotourism, but it also its major aim – to work towards sustainable development. This is a very important inclusion, which shows that ecotourism is an activity that is to be undertaken with the long-term objective of developing tourism solutions that are low impact,

and which are conscious of the sensitive nature of the environment that tourists will be coming into. It brings an ecocentric perspective to the meaning of ecotourism, and allows no possible misunderstanding of the intended meanings.

The Ecotourism Association of Australia uses a model that is quite similar in meaning to that of Hawkins and Khan, 'ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation' (Ecotourism Australia 2006). This definition is conceptually sound. It allows a clear picture of ecotourism as a method of learning, communications and conservation that is to be promoted and fostered through the activity of tourism. As this is an industry accepted definition, it is this definition that will be adopted for the purpose of this paper.

Regarding tourism, there is not a large amount of literature dealing with the phenomenon of volunteer tourism. Stebbins (2004) has conducted some work in trying to conceptualise volunteering in the context of leisure. Much research is currently being undertaken in relation to people who undertake volunteering

experiences as their leisure activities and what their motivations towards volunteering are, as well as the benefits they perceive in undertaking such activities (Wearing 2001). Stebbins believes that the motivational reasons and socioeconomic conditions vary vastly, with different demographic categories of people who chose to volunteer (Wearing 2004). Both demographics have different motivations, but it seems that the two motives of self-sacrifice and self-interest are common to all categories (Wearing 2004). Stebbins (1982) concludes that it is an important part of people's lives in its relation to personal fulfilment, identity enhancement and self-expression.

Because of the frequent occurrence of volunteering in places away from the volunteers' home domiciles, the concept of volunteering has been frequently associated with the phenomenon of tourism, and given its own terminology: 'volunteer tourism'. This concept refers to tourists who prefer and therefore organise to take holidays that often entail 'aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment' (Wearing 2001).

Volunteer tourism has also been viewed as a form of alternative tourism or ecotourism emphasising the sustainable, responsible and educational undertone of the activity (Wearing 2001; Mieczkowski 1995). Further, the 'volunteer-tourism' experience has been viewed as a contextual platform for the intertwining interactions among the ecotourism element, the volunteer element and the serious leisure element (Stebbins 1982; Wearing 2001).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SELFDEVELOPMENT THROUGH VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Experiential learning and selfdevelopment are two extremely important interdependent elements of the volunteer tourism experience. They can be said to be one of the main reasons why people choose volunteer tourism experiences.

Self-construction is a dynamic process that is affective, social, cognitive, cultural, and communicative, and it is structured simultaneously at multiple levels, including those of the individual, family and culture (Miller & Mangelsdorf 2005). It is therefore important to understand the social nature of people, and how this sociality affects volunteer tourists before, during and after their volunteer experience.

As social beings, the accumulated experience of self is gained through relationships with others; understanding oneself as a unique and distinct person in the world occurs as social experience is mediated through cognition (DeSocio 2005). Therefore, experience and, in particular, social experience with others who are similar to and different from ourselves, provides the fabric for the development of self – fabric that must be shaped into a meaningful and comprehensible whole or 'identity' through cognitive processes of selective attention, language, memory, social comparison, self reflection and interpretation (DeSocio 2005, p. 54). When one relates these ideas and concepts back to the idea of volunteer tourism, it becomes clear that the processes and experiences faced by these tourists will lead them to develop their 'selves' as they continue through their volunteer tourism experience, and that this development will be largely defined and shaped by the social interactions and learning experiences they encounter.

One of the most important learning processes that a volunteer tourist will undergo is that of experiential learning. However, here it is important to recognise that writers in this field tend to define this concept in two contrasting senses. On the one hand, the term is used to describe the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant setting (Brookfield 1983, p. 16). Experiential learning, therefore, involves a, 'direct encounter with the phenomena being studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter, or only considering the possibility of doing something about it.' (Borzak 1981, quoted in Brookfield 1983). This sort of learning is frequently initiated and encouraged by an institution and might be used on training programs for professions such as social work and teaching, or in field study programs such as those for the development of social administration skills.

The second type of experiential learning is 'education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life' (Houle 1980, p. 221). Here learning is not sponsored by some formal educational institution but by people themselves. It is learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience and is the way that a majority of people do their learning.

This second definition of experiential learning is reminiscent of the concept of 'service learning'

which is described by Lafon (2006) as a method of education that enriches learning by engaging people in meaningful service to their communities. Studies have found that the practice of community engagement through experiential learning devices such as service learning can be related to the levels of personal engagement, effort, and competency beliefs (Chen & Stevenson 1995).

Experiential learning theory states that concrete experiences help people grasp information best when people can reflect on those experiences and experiment actively with the concepts they are learning (Sheckley & Keeton 1997). Experiential education can provide greater depth of information processing, and thus a greater potential impact on learning, than less active methods (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier & Benson 2006). An important part of the process of experiential learning is the element of surprise in the experience (Scales et al. 2006). By surprise it is meant the degree to which it does not easily and immediately confirm an individual's prior expectations. In Sheckley and Keeton's (1997, p. 50) model, the expectations, values, images, and models of meaning developed from prior experience that learners hold in semantic memory – and the cultural values, norms, and beliefs they have assimilated – interact with the concrete experience to confirm or disconfirm prior expectations, values, and so forth (Scales et al. 2006). Without strong opportunities for reflection on the experience, learners will tend to assimilate the experience into their existing models of meaning. But with the structured opportunity to reflect, describe, discuss, and construct meaning from the experience, learners have the potential to develop more complex understandings and more comprehensive intellectual functioning (Scales et al. 2006).

Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn, in their 1992 study of student engagement in US high schools, found that student engagement increases when the activities presented involve students in the construction of knowledge, ownership of the cognitive work, and authentic connection to the 'real world' and community. Service-learning is a primary example of experientially engaging students in such 'shared inquiry', meaningful decision making, and integration of classwork and community life (Zeldin 2004).

For the purpose of this paper both definitions of experiential learning are considered appropriate, as both types of experiential learning are likely to be experienced by a volunteer tourist.

In interviews conducted as part of a PhD thesis, Wearing (1998) spoke to a number of returned volunteer tourists to understand how their volunteer tourist experiences had affected them and their perceived gains from undertaking such an activity. One interviewee in particular noted:

I've never felt very comfortable before in giving people directions and organising people if things weren't being done. Afterwards I felt really comfortable in doing that. So I think I developed a lot of self-confidence because I had the ability to organise what had to be done and do it in an efficient manner. [...] I developed self-confidence so that was one thing. [...] The energy in the group to do things as well, it's still keeping me going. Since I've come back I've had so much energy to experience a lot of things. I've been really busy since I've come back and I'm really eager to learn new things and to put my entire self into my job. I guess I want to do the best that I can in everything because the harder you try the more you get out of it, which is something I've really learnt. The more effort I put in, I found that I got so much back. Just the effort of going up and trying to say something in Spanish to people, they appreciated that so much. So I apply the same principle when I'm back here, to go out of my way, take that extra step to do things and people really appreciate that.

The volunteer experience really helped this participant to develop new skills and abilities through the process of experiencing situations, and learning from them first hand. She states that the development of these new skills and attitudes is a direct result of being placed in the position of being a volunteer in a foreign country. Similarly, another participant in the same set of interviews states:

I think probably the Youth Challenge structure, taught me a lot about living skills, also interpersonal skills, communication and responsibilities. Santa Elena itself, personally I think gave me a lot of peace. [...] I think it has improved me as a person.

Both of these examples highlight the nature of the volunteer tourism experience as one that heightens and improves the participants' understanding and

knowledge of themselves and their capabilities. Where the participant may be lacking confidence in an area (for example, leadership or time management), volunteer tourism has been shown to improve the participants' abilities, and further stimulate their drive and desire to push these skills further.

VOLUNTEERS AND THIRD CULTURE ISSUES

In the consideration of the ideas of immigration and third cultured people, it is necessary to understand the psychological processes of adaptation that most volunteers will undergo during their time away from their home domicile. The most common term for this process of adjustment is 'culture shock', and can be applied to almost any form of long haul tourism. The idea of culture shock was first conceptualised by Oberg (1954; 1960), as the consequence of strain and anxiety resulting from contact with a new culture and the feelings of loss, confusion and impotence resulting from loss of accustomed cultural cues and social rules. Cultural shock derives from both the challenge of new cultural surroundings and from the loss of a familiar cultural environment (Rhinesmith, 1985). Cultural shock causes both psychological and physiological reactions. Psychological reactions include physiological, emotional, interpersonal, cognitive, and social components, as well as the effects resulting from changes in sociocultural relations, cognitive fatigue, role stress and identity loss (Winkleman 2003).

Despite the fact that many different authors use their own labels when referring to the different phases of culture shock, four primary phases of this phenomenon are generally understood to involve the following (Winkleman 2003):

- The honeymoon or tourist phase
- The crises or cultural shock phase
- The adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase
- The adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase.

The phases are both sequential and cyclical. The shift from crises to adjustment and adaptation can repeat as one encounters new crises, requiring additional adjustments. One may become effectively bicultural, and then the adaptation phase is a permanent stage (Winkleman 2003).

It is this idea of biculturalism that is alluded to in the concept of the 'third culture', the concept of not being able to culturally 'match' those people in the culture surrounding the participant due to the participant's understanding and sense of belonging to a second or subsequent culture. This idea is manifested in the participant's feeling that they belong neither in their home or host cultures, because the participant has developed their own culture, which is a combination of the two cultures that the participant is trying to assimilate. In adjusting to a wide variety of stresses and influences, they incorporate elements of both their host culture and their passport culture into a 'third culture' (Pollock and Van Reken 1999).

'THIRD CULTURED' VOLUNTEERS AND RE-ASSIMILATION INTO THEIR HOME SOCIETY

An individual's life can only be understood backward, yet must be lived forward.

– Søren Kierkegaard.

La Brack (as cited in Singer 1999) calls re-entry a kind of 'litmus test' for a culture. If one examines the kinds of things that returnees do that drive the people at home crazy (i.e. if you can name the values that are being violated), you will also find that these are among the core values of the society (La Brack, as cited in Singer 1999). According to La Brack it is this misunderstanding that the returnees are either unaware of, or not sufficiently appreciative of, that cause conflicts. Due to this, it is possible for the re-entry experience to be felt very differently in varied cultures. Speaking about the repatriation of third-cultured corporate workers, Frazee (1997) notes that those who adapt most completely to living and working in another culture, are generally the people who have the toughest time coming back into their home environments. It is felt that this is because such people's lives have changed so much. For many who live overseas for a period of months or years, their values and their lifestyles change and so readjusting back to the home environment is extremely difficult for them (Frazee 1997).

By applying these ideas to volunteer tourists, it is easy to see that those tourists who have strived to envelop themselves in their host culture, and have learned to live with the locals on local terms will be the tourists who suffer the most as a result of the

repatriation process. This idea is further extended by Citron's (1996) study of the repatriation process of students returning from study in Spain to the United States of America, which found that all of her participants felt varying degrees of culture shock. The re-entry experience was found to manifest itself across four dimensions of students' lives. These were the physical, the interpersonal, the cultural and the personal dimensions (Citron 1996). Students' adjustment patterns in Spain and during re-entry were found to vary significantly by student and no generalisable relationships were found between them. A relationship was found, however, between how re-entry was experienced in each of these four dimensions and whether a student had lived in Spain according to the home culture's norms, the norms of the third culture that students had created for themselves in Spain, or according to the host culture's norms (Citron 1996). This reaffirms Frazee's (1997) aforementioned comments.

The level of reverse culture shock felt by returned volunteers is something largely dependant on the volunteers themselves, as it is their level of mental, emotional and psychological involvement with the volunteering process that will determine the level of impact their return will have on them. For some people, reverse culture shock will not be a huge issue, because upon their return they will find meaning in activities in their lives. For others however, reverse culture shock may leave them feeling like foreigners in their own land (Coschignano 2000). This is due to the new ideas, perceptions and values that many volunteer tourists develop whilst in their host country (usually a developing nation or community). Many volunteers may feel a sense of 'connection' with their host society because the belief systems in place in such societies are most closely aligned to their own than those of their home societies, especially where host communities value a collective value system over an individualistic one as can frequently be seen in Western nations. The notions of individualism and collectivism refer to the cultural aspects and social behaviour of a society (Gerganov, di Lova, Petkova, & Paspalanova 1996). These constructs comprise values, moral principles and beliefs about relationships of the individual with others and relationships among social communities (Lindsay 1930; Hamilton 1930). The fundamental difference between individualism and

collectivism is expressed in the main postulate of collectivism, which places the community above the individual. According to collectivism, the life strategy approved by society is not the acquisition of individual prosperity, but the welfare of the entire community. Thus, each member of the community is expected to devote all his or her abilities and efforts toward attainment of the common goal (Hamilton 1930).

For volunteers who experience such conflict, values such as 'community over the individual', 'help without being asked', or even simpler concepts such as 'community' and 'selflessness', are lost in more materialistic neo-liberal societies such as our own (Stowe 2003). Such fundamental conflicts of life-paradigms are frequently found in volunteer tourists recently returned into their home communities, and it is this paradigm misalignment which causes a certain level of reverse culture shock. Accordingly, it can now be seen that the level of penetration into the host community by the volunteer tourist and the length of time spent in that community are both likely indicators as to the level of reverse culture shock that will be felt by the tourist upon re-entry into their home society.

According to Gould (2002) individuals cope with such transitional changes in two ways. Primary control involves changing circumstances and the environment to suit one's wishes, while secondary control involves changing one's attitudes and desires to suit objective reality (Gould 2002). When primary control strategies such as anger and protest are ineffective, individuals turn to secondary strategies such as detachment and adaptation. Primary control is typically not possible in institutional settings, and frequently third-cultured volunteer tourists employ secondary strategies, especially in their university and work lives. This can be seen by a frequency of detaching from their given study or work environments and shifting their cognitive attention from perceived 'mundane' or 'routine' activities to more challenging activities within their home culture environments (Gould 2002).

According to a study conducted by Mehta and Belk (1991), the things to which we are attached help to define who we are, who we were, and who we hope to become. It is suggested in their study that these meanings are likely to be especially salient to those in identity transitions. Stowe (2003) suggests

that the best way for tourists to lessen the effects of repatriation and reverse culture shock is to find something meaningful that they can concentrate on when they return. This could be in the form of meaningful friendships and work that matters to them, or some sort of activity that allows them to use the skills they have developed overseas, such as language classes, or continuing the volunteering process within their home community. Frequently, it is this involvement in the returned volunteer's home community that could make the difference between a smooth and successful reintegration into their home society, and a turbulent unfulfilling return home.

Volunteering in home societies is often encouraged by volunteering organisations as a way for returned volunteers to use the skills they have developed overseas, as well as to help them find meaning in their home lives (Youth Challenge Australia 2006). This sort of activity can also be used as a sort of reflection time for the volunteer, should they wish it, which can be useful in understanding and accepting the differences in the different societies in which they have participated, and allow them to accept the differences more easily. Additionally, as mentioned previously, such concrete experiences help people to process information best when given the opportunity to reflect on those experiences and experiment actively with the concepts they have learned (Sheckley & Keeton 1997).

Volunteer tourists often play an important part in the development and completion of community projects in developing nations and communities. However, one element of their experience that is largely overlooked is their return to their home communities, as it is thought that such people will not have a problem as their home communities are their own. However returned volunteer tourists are often not able to reconcile the skills, values, and attitudes they have developed overseas with those of their neo-liberal home societies, especially where their host societies have been underdeveloped or developing communities. Volunteering in their home societies is seen by many as a way to reconcile these differences in a constructive and meaningful way, which allows the returned volunteer a sense of contribution and purpose in their own society as well. It is often this sense of purpose which can make the difference between a successful reintegration, and an unsuccessful one.

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