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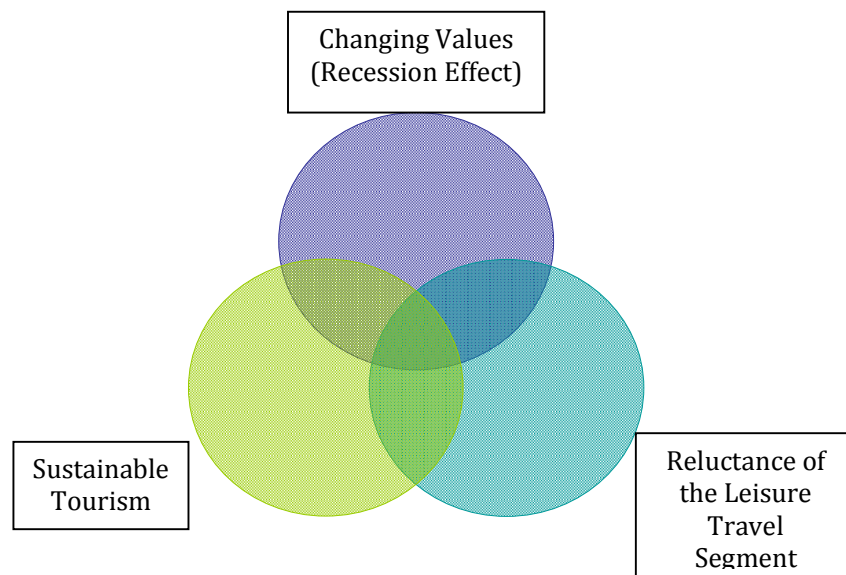
# Voluntourism: The Human Side of Sustainable Tourism

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Convergence is an overused word in the study of business and management, but new products and business models do tend to emerge when multiple trends come together. In doing research for an article on service-based tourism, one of those intersections appeared:



### **Recession Effects**

A recent Newsweek article (1) compares the potential effects of the recent recession to those that were noted after the Great Depression. The enduring images of soup kitchens and the stories from our parents and grandparents tell of a time when neighbors helped each other. The Newsweek article notes that "Writer Gay Talese was taught by his father to "take nothing for granted, to be frugal and above all to be self-sufficient". He believes that if this (current) recession "can end the foolishness and spoiled attitudes of selfish and rich people," then it "may be exactly what we need." Reinforcing the feelings of the times, Franklin Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address included the following quote: "The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit."

### **Sustainable Tourism**

Each of our industry magazines now has an increasing number of features on sustainability. The broadest explanation of sustainability refers to three-pronged principles of minimizing environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impacts. The Sustainable Tourism Gateway website (2) offers multiple definitions of sustainable tourism. The definition that resonates most is "a process which meets the needs of the

present tourists and host communities, whilst protecting and enhancing needs in the future." Much has been written detailing how the development of tourism investment projects has been, and will be, affected by the incorporation of sustainability principles. The focus of this article is on the socio-cultural aspects of balancing the needs of tourist and host communities, specifically tourists who are motivated to perform service and host communities that are in need of external assistance.

### **Stimulating Travelers' Behavior**

The third and final bubble in the chart above represents the dilemma of effectively attracting upscale and luxury travelers to resume their old travel behaviors, which they have been reluctant to do. The pre-recession advertising slogans of "I want it all" and "Because you're worth it" are now out of fashion and are being replaced by newer messages, such as, "We're all in this together" (1). A combination of luxury "guilt", more frugal spending patterns, and stretched family budgets, made this segment of the travel market the hardest hit in 2009.

Various sources indicate that today's major purchases require an enhanced element of value or meaning. Karen Weiner Escalera, a blogger on luxury travel trends writes, "We're witnessing a change in consumption patterns. People are looking more at function and comfort and authenticity." A recent Wall Street Journal article provides some hints to ways in which companies are combating luxury guilt: "...some luxury brands are emphasizing marketing tactics that they hope will push away the guilt and reboot consumers' desire to spend. That can mean touting a special justification for splurging - profits are channeled to a charity, for instance - or offering novel shopping experiences that can make people forget their guilt."(3)

### **Voluntourism**

The simultaneous notoriety of these three issues (changing values, sustainability, and reluctance to spend) favors the growth of service-based tourism in the mainstream leisure travel market.

Anyone who has flown to Latin America has probably seen groups of a dozen or more people (mostly teenagers with a few grandparent-aged chaperones) seated together at the departure gate wearing the same T-shirt, many donning Birkenstocks (or more recently Crocs), on their way to Guatemala or Peru to do service work, typically organized by a church group. At the other end of the spectrum, we see clips of the "rich and famous", such as Sean Penn in Haiti or Brad Pitt in New Orleans, or even "Dr. 90210" doing corrective cosmetic surgery in Mexico. "Voluntourism", combining volunteer service work with tourism, is a growing segment of the travel market.

The examples noted above describe two extremes, but there should be great potential for growth by bringing voluntourism vacations to

**Voluntourism  
Market Data**

middle- and upper-income travelers who are motivated to have more meaningful travel experiences, but who also value safety, comfort and other leisure aspects of family vacation time.

A survey was conducted in 2008 by Dr. Nancy McGehee of Virginia Tech and David Clemmons, founder of Vouluntourism.org (4) that estimates there are close to five million US travelers who have taken a “voluntourism trip”, of which approximately one million involved international travel. Four motivational themes were evident among voluntourists: cultural immersion, seeking camaraderie, giving back and seeking educational and bonding opportunities.

Data suggests that there are more people interested in service-oriented travel opportunities than have actually had such experiences. A 2009 survey (5) of 1,800 people who consider themselves to be extremely or very “eco-conscious” travelers revealed that while nearly 60% of respondents said they would be interested in volunteering on a future trip, only 25% said they had actually done it. Of those who had volunteered, 58% stated that they remained involved with the project after returning from the volunteer experience, indicating the enduring effect of such an experience. These data suggest that there may be pent-up demand for voluntourism experiences. Supporting this theory is a more mainstream Conde Nast/MSNBC poll which reported that 14% of respondents had taken a volunteer holiday, but 55% said they would like to (6). The large gap between desire and experience is worthy of additional research.

The available data on voluntourism often co-mingles service-based voluntourism data with that of the adventure travel and eco-tourism market segments, which, in my opinion, dilutes the validity of the data. The hypothesis I would like to see tested is whether or not there is a large mainstream traveler segment that would be motivated to purchase a voluntourism-flavored family vacation if price, comfort level and perceived safety were equivalent to that of a typical beach or cruise vacation.

My thinking is that in these post-recessionary times many families are still postponing “reward” and “frivolous” spending, whether a result of diminished purchasing power or simply on moral grounds. A family voluntourism vacation could combat these obstacles to travel. If, during a week of vacation, a family could share the experience of helping others, they would most likely not consider the experience to be self-indulgent or frivolous. On the contrary, such a vacation can be both a bonding experience for the family and a teaching experience for teenage sons and daughters that can serve to re-calibrate their self-image and lifestyle expectations, relative to others in less fortunate communities and circumstances.

It appears that at the luxury end of the travel market, there is a rising tide of Voluntourism options. Travelanthropist.com (7) reports that major travel organizations including Conde Nast Traveler magazine, Ritz Carlton, and Abercrombie & Kent have all established programs, such as the "Give Back Getaways" (a calendar of approximately 50 events per year in Ritz Carlton destinations around the world) that make it easier for luxury travelers to access volunteer opportunities while traveling both domestically and abroad. Hands Up Holidays, which bills itself as "Luxury Volunteer Travel" offers a variety of vacations that combine sight-seeing and voluntourism, with itineraries ranked by activity level and comfort level.

For more cost conscious travelers, organizations like GlobeAware - Adventures in Service, offer one-week voluntourism trips to many foreign locations at more modest prices. Accommodations can be in host family homes or "modest inns". Travelocity has a program that grants travel scholarships to applicants who participate in the voluntourism offerings of GlobeAware and several other providers. However, such accommodations may be off-putting to upscale or less adventurous travelers.

While opportunities may be increasing at the luxury and budget ends of the market, there appear to be few choices for the large middle market of families who budget \$750 to \$1,250 per person per week for a family vacation and expect an upscale array of products and services.

### **One Million Hours For Haiti - The Ideal Voluntourism Project**

The idea that sparked interest in writing this article was the dilemma of how people could personally participate in helping the earthquake recovery process in Haiti in a way that is safe and meaningful, without creating a burden for the host community. What appears to be an ideal solution is the volunteer cruise.

Such a cruise would leave South Florida every Saturday afternoon and arrive in Port-au-Prince on Sunday night. On Monday through Thursday, four to five hour shore excursion choices each day (at standard shore excursion prices) would range from planting trees, to sorting recyclable materials from earthquake debris, helping to construct shelter, and other activities that would be organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) already active in the Port-au-Prince area. On Friday of each cruise week, a celebration beach barbeque would be held at the cruise lines' private islands, and the cruise would end in South Florida on Saturday morning.

The predicted benefits of such a project are as follows:

- With two cruise lines offering weekly service between Thanksgiving, 2010 and Easter, 2011, each with 1,500

participating passengers performing 20 hours of service (five hours per day for four days), *over 1.2 million hours of volunteer work could be achieved.*

- For the cruise line, the difference between this itinerary and other Caribbean itineraries would be minimal: 1) NGO coordinators would replace the role of tour operators used at other destinations. Travelers would still pay for the “shore excursions”, so that the NGOs’ costs would be reimbursed, and the cruise lines would retain their share of excursion revenue as on other cruises (an important profit center for cruise operators); 2) a significant number of passengers will be incremental; that is, they will be individuals who would not be cruising if this itinerary were not being offered. Surveys and market research could better quantify the incremental demand.
- For travelers, the value proposition is essentially a return to winter vacations without the guilt. The trip is no longer thought of as a reward, which needs to be “deserved”, but as an opportunity to give back, to spend quality time as a family, and to re-charge both the body and the spirit. The unique cruise offering allows travelers to participate in a hands-on manner, while minimizing concerns over personal safety, the comfort level of the accommodations, or of being a burden to the local community. In addition, the traditional benefits of a Caribbean cruise (escape from winter, rest and relaxation, unlimited entertainment, food and beverage) can be enjoyed throughout the seven-day experience.
- For the NGOs, the use of 1.2 million hours of unskilled labor presents both an opportunity and a challenge. This labor will need to be harnessed in such a way as to accelerate achievement of the organizations’ goals, while providing the volunteers with a meaningful short-term experience. Skills of tour operators, logistics specialists and other entrepreneurial types would most likely need to be tapped to translate the mission of the NGOs into organized five hour “excursions” in which 3,000 daily participants are outfitted with tools, trained, and transported in a safe and well organized manner.
- With the proper public relations and marketing approach, the cruise industry could find itself a well-justified hero in the area of global community service, a new market segment of cruise travelers would be created, and One Million Hours for Haiti could become an historic event that brings voluntourism to the mainstream travel market. Royal Caribbean Cruise Line’s use of the “Lust for Life” advertising slogan could take on a whole new

meaning. If well executed, thousands of people would want to participate, some just to be able to say they were there.

### **Incremental Steps for Other Hospitality Providers**

There are many less grandiose ways in which voluntourism can be incorporated in the offerings of hotels and other travel service providers. A few of these are as follows:

- The San Francisco Hilton has created the position of Community Projects Manager which acts as liaison with non-profit organizations in the community. In its broadest sense, the position supports the hotel's goal of being recognized as a good neighbor and a good corporate citizen. Events have been organized for employee groups as well as hotel guest groups, including beach clean-ups and other "fix-up" projects in the community.
- In a hotel directory of services, a page could be devoted to local service opportunities. For instance, the spouse of a conventioner visiting New York might find on this page how to volunteer for a morning shift of helping "God's Love We Deliver" in packaging meals to be delivered to home-bound people in need. Similarly, on a rainy day in Miami Beach, a hotel guest might find that they can contribute four hours to the Camillus House homeless shelter.
- Companies like Xola Consulting, in addition to their core business of consulting on adventure travel, offer assistance to companies in fostering team building through incorporating voluntourism in corporate events. Hotel meeting planners, with proper training, could also assist corporate clients in adjusting their agendas to include such activities.
- Cruise operators could incorporate voluntourism shore excursions at many ports of call as part of the standard offerings to their passengers.

### **Conclusion**

While voluntourism is not new, it appears to be at a product life-cycle stage where it can transition from a marginal offering to a mainstream travel market alternative, whether as the "main event" or to be incorporated in small doses in trips with other objectives (corporate meetings, family vacations, etc.). Hopefully this article will stimulate research directed at better quantifying voluntourism demand from the mainstream travel market, rather than as a subset of the adventure travel or eco-tourism markets. If the article serves to inspire someone to execute "One Million Hours for Haiti", that would be even more satisfying.

### About the Author



**Andrew Cohan** is a consultant in the Miami office of HVS, the premier global hospitality consulting firm. Since 1980, HVS has provided various consulting services for over 20,000 hotels worldwide. HVS operates out of 30 offices in 15 countries. Since joining HVS in 2006, Andrew has specialized in pre-development consulting for developers of mixed-use resorts in geography ranging from Central America to British Columbia, Canada. Andrew has an M.B.A. from the University of Pittsburgh and a Masters in Hospitality Management from Florida International University, and is a regular contributor of articles to the HVS Global Hospitality Report.

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