International Volunteering

Filling in the gaps
Volunteering overseas is increasingly popular with people of all ages, from young people on gap years, to older people taking a sabbatical or in retirement. Unfortunately though there are some serious criticisms leveled at volunteering, particularly where the boundaries between volunteering and tourism become blurred – the so-called ‘voluntourism’ sector. These can question everything from how certain projects are formulated and whether they bring real benefits to local people, through to the support and safety provision for volunteers.

Volunteering can be a rewarding and sometimes life-changing experience. It can also contribute something to the people in the place where you volunteer. However, this is not necessarily the case. This briefing seeks identify the questions you need to ask in seeking a worthwhile volunteering experience.

Volunteering overseas is increasingly popular with people of all ages, from young people on gap years, to older people taking a sabbatical or in retirement. Unfortunately though there are some serious criticisms leveled at volunteering, particularly where the boundaries between volunteering and tourism become blurred – the so-called ‘voluntourism’ sector. These can question everything from how certain projects are formulated and whether they bring real benefits to local people, through to the support and safety provision for volunteers.

Volunteering overseas is increasingly popular with people of all ages, from young people on gap years, to older people taking a sabbatical or in retirement. Unfortunately though there are some serious criticisms leveled at volunteering, particularly where the boundaries between volunteering and tourism become blurred – the so-called ‘voluntourism’ sector. These can question everything from how certain projects are formulated and whether they bring real benefits to local people, through to the support and safety provision for volunteers.

You only need to Google ‘volunteering overseas’ to see just how many opportunities are available (over 15 million results as at 29th July 2013). So how do you, as a prospective volunteer, decide which projects or organisations to volunteer with? Are there identifiable ‘best practices’ which organisations should adopt to ensure beneficial outcomes? What should you take into account when choosing what to do, where to go and who to go with?

**Why Tourism Concern?**

Tourism Concern was formed more than twenty years ago in order to encourage forms of tourism which are fairer to the communities where it takes place. When travelers, whether with backpacks or with suitcases, arrive at their chosen destination they have an impact: by interacting with local people, by spending money, and ultimately by encouraging the development of tourism there. Whilst this can bring positive benefits, our ‘tourism concern’ is that local people sometimes carry an unfair share of the costs of this tourism development – including social, cultural and environmental costs – and yet gain very little benefit. The question which Tourism Concern constantly revisits is therefore how the negative impacts of tourism to local communities might be reduced, and the benefits to them increased.

Volunteering, particularly over longer periods and using specialist skills, may be seen as being a part of development work. However, some shorter term placements may be more clearly understood as forms of niche tourism. As such, they can generate similar concerns about negative impacts and lack of benefit to local people.

**Gap Year & International Volunteering Standard**

In 2007, Tourism Concern was prompted to enter the volunteering debate by concerns that lack of regulation, dubious business practices and inexperience might be causing considerable harm via inappropriate and badly
What’s the issue?

We were also worried that some volunteers were even being put at risk. We commissioned research to investigate the truth behind the rhetoric and our conclusions* led to the development, in partnership with a number of volunteering and other partner organisations – including NIDOS in Scotland and Comhlamh in Ireland – of a volunteering standard. The Gap Year and International Volunteering Standard (GIVS) was developed around the 8 principles shown right. If you are thinking of volunteering, check that any organisation you are considering signing up with is responsible in the way they recruit volunteers, find placements and manage the volunteering process. Asking questions about each of the principles is a good starting point.

Best Practice Principles

The Gap Year and International Volunteering Standard (GIVS) is built around the following 8 principles. It is important that any organisation you are considering volunteering with can demonstrate compliance with these principles.

1. **PURPOSE**
   Achievable objectives that have been identified by host partners and communities.

2. **MARKETING**
   Marketing and imagery that is consistent with good practice.

3. **RECRUITMENT**
   Fair, consistent and transparent recruitment procedures.

4. **PRE-PLACEMENT INFORMATION**
   Clear and accurate information on the sending organisation, their partners, programmes and volunteer placements.

5. **PRE-PLACEMENT TRAINING**
   Appropriate preparation, training and induction.

6. **VOLUNTEER SUPPORT**
   Ongoing support appropriate to the placement and volunteer.

7. **RISK MANAGEMENT**
   Ensuring protection, safety and well being of volunteers and those they work with.

8. **MONITORING & EVALUATION**
   Ongoing monitoring and evaluation in order to improve performance and ensure work remains relevant.

Staying with a family really helped Jane and I with getting accustomed with our new culture. When you go on holiday you do not get enough time to really experience the new culture. Going as a volunteer gave me the chance to really immerse myself into Indian culture. The family would always invite us to special events and local festivals.

*Bryan volunteered in India with Latitude*
How do you want to volunteer?

Is volunteering be expected bring benefits to someone other than yourself? If so, you should be reassured that any placement you are considering will have a positive impact as well as fulfilling your personal goals?

International volunteering can be defined as ‘individuals offering their services willingly, without financial gain, to make a contribution to a community in a developing country’. But it can of course be good for you, the volunteer, too – perhaps producing a feeling of self worth, helping develop skills, promoting cultural interaction, and yes, hopefully it can also be fun!

What is volunteering?
Volunteering overseas now encompasses an extensive and varied range of tasks, projects, programmes and organisations. In practical terms this variety makes it challenging to make a meaningful comparison between the vast array of options in order to can gauge which are making a genuine difference, and/or which are most suitable for you.

You can find placements working in wildlife, research, conservation, building work, teaching, community development, working with children, sports coaching, business, and so on – the list is endless. You can volunteer from a few days to several years, and in any of dozens of countries worldwide. There are specialist placements requiring particular knowledge and experience but many others that do not require any specific skills.

The organisations offering these placements are equally varied. Non-profit organisations such as many of those working in development or conservation for example; or commercial companies offering volunteering as ‘a unique travel experience abroad’. Some send hundreds of volunteers overseas every year, others just one or two. Some have long term programmes of interlinked work, others short term one-off projects. Volunteers may be sent as part of a team led by a trained and experienced
leader, but others are sent as individuals to specific projects. Some organisations have their own offices overseas, others have long standing relationships with local partners, and some may only act as ‘brokers’ for other people’s projects.

**Giving something back**

We have all become much more familiar with the idea of ‘development’ in recent years, with campaigns such as Live Aid and Comic Relief and extensive media interest. At the same time we increasingly hanker after more individualistic travel experiences, looking for ‘authenticity’ and meaningful engagement. Together this has created a demand for short term travel opportunities where we also want to ‘give something back’, even if we are unable to commit long term. Inevitably the tourism industry sees this form of volunteering as a commercial opportunity and so have developed what may be termed volunteer tourism products.

**Short term vs long term**

Shorter term commercially-sold projects may tend to focus on goals which are quickly reached so that we feel we have achieved something during our stays. Any particular volunteer may well only be a one-off customer. So, to ensure their businesses remain profitable, organisations have to focus on ways of attracting future new customers. Projects may therefore be designed for the convenience and motivation of volunteers rather than putting the needs of the community first.

Some critics argue that the length of a programme is therefore a good indicator of who benefits. Of course this is not always so, and some well-managed short term placements can be worthwhile, particularly if contributing to longer term programmes, and there are longer term projects which are not well-conceived or run.

It is also possible that the benefits of volunteer tourism are not essentially developmental but are more to do with creating cultural understanding, perhaps even a shared sense of global responsibility. Volunteers may not contribute a great deal during a short placement, but can nevertheless learn from their visit, and can perhaps also provide a voice for the host organisations, their projects and communities when they return home.

It is up to you as the volunteer, to be clear about where you and your potential placement fit into this debate, and to approach it in the right way. Marketing to attract volunteers can generate an unrealistic expectation of the impact you will have. Development is very complex and, if you lack specialist skills and experience, and are not offered the requisite training, how can you expect to make a genuine contribution?

As we are about to explore, you need to be honest with yourself about your real motivations and then to consider whether what you want, and what you have to offer fits with any placement and/or organisation you may be considering. This is a good starting point for investigating placements in more detail.
Why do you want to volunteer?

Do you really know why you want to volunteer overseas? Is it to make a difference? Or perhaps to have a more meaningful engagement with a particular culture? To learn something? To further your career? To have fun? Possibly all of these things? Motivations are many and varied...but being clear about why you want to volunteer is really helpful in ensuring you have a rewarding and worthwhile experience.

One of the common frustrations that returning volunteers express is the mismatch between their own motivations and those of the organisation with whom they volunteered. This can be because they had an unrealistic expectations of what they would achieve, often because placements have been sold on the premise that a volunteer is going to ‘make a difference’...irrespective of their skills or the nature of the placement. Equally though it may be because the volunteers were not completely clear about their motivations when they signed up. For example, if you are a more travel-orientated volunteer, you might choose a placement based on your perceptions of the location, where in reality you will be required in somewhere you might not otherwise choose to visit. Or you may assume you will be supported by a like-minded team but find you are a lone volunteer in a remote project.

There are many reasons for wanting to volunteer but, unless you are clear about yours, you may end up disappointed when your placement fails to fulfil them.

Obviously it should be a key priority for a volunteer programme that it recruit volunteers with personal characteristics and

Coping with cultural change

The Humanitarian Centre, Guidelines for Sending Volunteers on Overseas Placements, 2009

Everyone struggles to understand other cultures and communities, and we are all influenced by our own upbringing, values, morals and lifestyles. Cultural sensitivity is not about denying these biases or pretending they don’t exist; it is about self-awareness. Organisations should encourage volunteers to take the time in each new situation to understand their own reactions. This may help to prevent kneejerk reactions to unfamiliar customs. Placements should not be a test of a volunteer’s endurance. Emotional resilience, a positive attitude, and the ability to cope flexibly in a range of situations are all qualities which cannot be guaranteed through the application process.

It would be my first time away from home and certainly the first time I had ever been to Africa. I wanted to prove to my parents that I could look after myself, despite being unable to keep my bedroom tidy and I wanted to prove to my friends that I wasn’t going to settle for just any old course from UCAS. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to be but I knew what I wanted to do!

Laura volunteered as a teacher in Malawi with Latitude
Some reasons why people volunteer
See the world
Get away from work/home
Make a difference
Enhance work skills
Add to CV
Experience a different culture
Show solidarity
Impress others
Get a job
Because friends are doing it
Have fun
Challenge
Meet new people
Help others

The images that are used to market volunteer tourism often depict intimate scenes of childcare in orphanages, hands-on experience of working with endangered animals, or volunteers standing proudly beside a school that they have built. However, the reality of voluntary work can be very different, involving tasks that seem only indirectly connected to the main aims of a project and potentially leaving volunteers feeling disappointed or detached from the communities that they are trying to help. Understanding volunteer tourists’ expectations of project work and the desires that motivate them is therefore crucial for ensuring the success of programmes.

Volunteer tourists often experience a powerful desire to finish projects, especially where manual labour and construction work are involved. One volunteer that I spoke to in Kenya told me that she wanted to finish building a house so that she could take a photo of it, show it to her mum and say, ‘I helped to build that’. This statement seems to illustrate volunteer tourists’ need to make a tangible contribution to projects and to return home with some sort of proof to show friends and family that they really have made a difference through their volunteering. This pressure may be particularly strong for volunteer tourists on a gap year, given the bad press that the practice often receives for encouraging young travellers to participate in projects of little value to host communities just so that they can feel they have helped.

Similarly, volunteer tourists may also express the need to feel an emotional connection to the people that they are trying to help, which can affect the type of projects that they are drawn to. For example, my research has shown that given the choice between building a classroom for a group of schoolchildren or a house for an elderly lady, many volunteer tourists will opt for the latter. This appeared to be because the volunteer tourists were better able to imagine the impact that the project would have on the woman’s life and because of the emotional immediacy of seeing an individual’s reaction and gratitude.

Volunteer tourists may need to accept that it is not always possible to complete projects that are longer-term in nature and that projects with a more communal emphasis, such as those based in schools, may deliver greater benefits than those centred on helping individuals.

If volunteers are encouraged to see that their actions can have a significant cumulative effect across a diverse range of settings then they are more likely to become passionate about projects that stand to benefit communities as well as themselves. Raising greater awareness of the purpose of voluntary projects and of what can reasonably be achieved during volunteer tourists’ stay in a country would therefore help to relieve the sense of frustration that is felt when projects fall short of their expectations and allow volunteers to take pride in their work, no matter how big or small their contribution.

Viewpoint
Expectations of projects
Émilie Crossley, PhD Candidate, Cardiff University, Wales

ambitions that maximize their contribution and commitment. Equally though you, the volunteer, should try to ensure that you are matched to something appropriate to your motivations. Think about potential placements in their broader context. This includes being clear about the objectives and identifying what knowledge you may need in order to fulfil them.

Why do you want to volunteer?
(List as many reasons as possible)
Where do you want to go?
How much time have you got to offer?
What might you be able to contribute?
What might you learn?
How remote are you happy to be?
Do you want to be with other volunteers?
Would you prefer some creature comforts and good communication facilities?

Similarly, volunteer tourists may also express the need to feel an emotional connection to the people that they are trying to help, which can affect the type of projects that they are drawn to. For example, my research has shown that given the choice between building a classroom for a group of schoolchildren or a house for an elderly lady, many volunteer tourists will opt for the latter. This appeared to be because the volunteer tourists were better able to imagine the impact that the project would have on the woman’s life and because of the emotional immediacy of seeing an individual’s reaction and gratitude.

Volunteer tourists may need to accept that it is not always possible to complete projects that are longer-term in nature and that projects with a more communal emphasis, such as those based in schools, may deliver greater benefits than those centred on helping individuals.

If volunteers are encouraged to see that their actions can have a significant cumulative effect across a diverse range of settings then they are more likely to become passionate about projects that stand to benefit communities as well as themselves. Raising greater awareness of the purpose of voluntary projects and of what can reasonably be achieved during volunteer tourists’ stay in a country would therefore help to relieve the sense of frustration that is felt when projects fall short of their expectations and allow volunteers to take pride in their work, no matter how big or small their contribution.
Who should you volunteer with?

There are all sorts of organisations offering volunteering, from charities and non-government organisations (NGOs) to companies that are run along commercial lines. So how do you choose which is best for you?

Some critics make a distinction between commercial and charitable or social enterprise organisations. Might the primary motivation of each – arguably, profit maximization for one, ‘development’ for the other – be a measure of their effectiveness? In our own 2007 research report ‘Gaps in Development’ Tourism Concern concluded that ‘host partners are reliant on the sending organisations for volunteers and funds and often have very little voice in the UK. This means they are vulnerable to exploitation when UK organisations are solely driven by profits’.

It is certainly worth questioning the values and the objectives of any organisation that you are considering volunteering with. However, being commercial does not automatically compromise development goals, particularly if they are supporting a local organisation pursuing locally defined objectives. And, as the Gap Year Guidebook points out, ‘size and status have little bearing on competence. A charity can be more efficient than a commercial company. Conversely a commercial company can show more sensitivity than a charity’.

The specific details should always be checked. You should look into an organisation’s status (eg charity, NGO, commercial), its background details (who manages it, who are the patrons, where it is registered) and of course how much it charges and what this covers.

Explore the organisation’s aims and goals, how it chooses volunteers, and the involvement of the host community. Why has the project been set up, who asked for volunteers and how involved are the intended beneficiaries in defining the aims and objectives and how they are addressed. Are you able to access any assessments of previous work? Look at short term achievements including: results of projects; which goals were achieved; economic and other benefits; and feedback from the local partner. If possible, also look for long term benefits of the programme to which you might contribute: economic, environmental and social sustainability; and capacity building of local people and organisations for example.

Wildlife & Conservation Volunteering – the Complete Guide (see ‘What is good practice?’ box right), includes comprehensive information on the difference between companies in their sector and how to judge them, giving a step-by-step guide for deciding your priorities and measuring organisations against them.
In practise it may be difficult for you to assess organisations’ achievements in any detail since you are reliant on the information they choose to share. Marketing by volunteer organisations – information on their websites for example – inevitably tends to focus on attracting volunteers. Even as credible an organisation as The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) makes the rather bold claim that ‘Volunteering with us on international development projects gives you the chance to change the world, enjoy the holiday of a lifetime, and have fun’.

It is therefore a very good idea to talk to previous volunteers with a project and/or organisation you may be considering. It is also worth checking social media.

Peter Lynch (www.peter-lynch.co.uk) is a professional travel writer and author of Wildlife & Conservation Volunteering – the Complete Guide, published by Bradt Travel Guides, 2012

There’s a general misapprehension that volunteering is, by definition, good. Volunteering in the familiarity and knowledge of your home country is probably always a positive experience but in a far-off land, with unknown economic imperatives and an unfamiliar culture - this is by no means a foregone conclusion.

A quick web search throws up a plethora of companies offering to organise volunteer trips to exotic places and most claim to be ethical, eco-friendly but green smokescreens and token charitable donations often disguise their tour-operator status.

Voluntourism has become big business and some of the world’s largest tour operators trade as apparently small specialist operators – so how much of the cash you pay actually contributes towards your volunteer project as opposed to UK overheads, publicity or shareholders?

If you want to avoid a hefty portion of your volunteering cash ending up in corporate coffers and want to ensure you don’t wind up on a dubious manufactured project - it’s essential to do some planning BEFORE looking at the seductive and sometimes spurious opportunities advertised on the web.

The problem for a prospective volunteer is that not all ‘volunteer projects’ are what they seem nor are they all the same.

If you do only one thing - think clearly about your PURPOSE. What is it you want to do, why do you want to do it and how will you know if you’ve achieved it? Be honest, if you just want to travel the world, have fun and meet people then recognise this.

After several years researching and working on wildlife conservation projects I have identified a number of criteria that help identify good organisations. There is no secret ‘best’ organisation; it all depends on exactly what the volunteer hopes to achieve, that’s why it’s essential to be clear about your reasons for wanting to volunteer.

1. Who is organising it? Are they a genuine registered UK charity or a business that contributes a small portion of your fee towards a charity fund?
2. What is their motivation? Are they primarily a business or were they set up to achieve a specific and worthwhile goal?
3. Has the volunteer organiser a written policy on ethics and responsibilities? What level of evidence is provided to demonstrate how they implement stated good intentions?
4. Is a wildlife project designed with specific conservation goals or is it just a dressed up safari opportunity to pet captured wildlife?
5. What have they achieved so far? This is the clincher. There are many examples of volunteers painting the same school again and again, counting the same sea turtles week after week and ‘orphanages’ renting village children to create work for volunteers. Is a reputable NGO or government agency involved? What’s the evidence, where are tangible achievements publicly acknowledged?
6. Don’t be fobbed off with PR fluff such as ‘we’ve sent thousands of people’, ‘thousands of volunteer pounds has aided the local economy’, ‘our volunteers have a life-changing experience’ etc
7. If ‘no knowledge or experience is required’ why don’t they use local people? Is it because they just want your money?
"I want to change the world!"
Choosing and designing volunteer placements

Stephen Young, Formerly VSO Country Director, Bangladesh and Nepal

Prospective volunteers expect many things of their placements. There are numerous important practical concerns, such as personal security and ability to communicate with family and friends, but for many the key question is whether there is real work to be done and whether the work will have a lasting impact in terms of human development. Volunteer placements can range hugely in length from months to years, but the need for them to have a worthwhile development purpose is equally strongly felt and rightly so. Volunteers working alongside colleagues at ground level are often better placed to share knowledge and skills than consultants who hover at a distance. Volunteers and their colleagues, and the agencies who bring them together, invest tremendous amounts of effort and money in making placements happen and they have the right to expect a thorough process of placement design.

CLEAR PURPOSE AND VISION FOR THE FUTURE
Why is the volunteer needed? Is the plan solidly based on the needs of the employing organisation and their aims? Is the volunteer placement a one-off event or part of a strategic progression of effort? Will the placement build on work done before and/or lead towards further work?

Few volunteers want to travel round the world to paint a wall that volunteers painted the previous year. Placement descriptions should include a clear statement of the reasons for needing a volunteer and it should be clear how this connects to the organisation’s goals.

CLEAR ROLES AND SUPPORT FOR THE VOLUNTEER AND COLLEAGUES
What will the volunteer do? Who will they report to, who will work with them and who will give them support to adapt to their new environment and be effective?

Time is short on volunteer placements, frustrations rise quickly if roles are not clearly defined. Volunteers, like anyone else, need to feel secure in their ability to do their job. They should be able to check (before departure) that their skills match the work expected of them. They should also be able to get some idea of the degree of isolation they might have in their work (and leisure) time, to get a sense of whether the job is right for them. The amount of support volunteers need is easy to underestimate – they are often well outside their comfort zone and may need more guidance than they would at home in order to work well and be happy in the experience. The same goes for their colleagues. Supporting expatriate volunteers can be a uniquely confusing and exhausting task, and volunteer colleagues and managers need to be well supported.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS
How realistic are the aims of the placement? How realistic are the expectations of the volunteer, their colleagues and their managers? How much rides on their “success”?

There is a powerful dynamic between the hard realities of everyday life and the optimism of people engaged in short-term assignments. Colleagues often want far more than a volunteer can offer and volunteers often want to leave far bigger footprints in the sands of time than their foot size! It is crucial that placements are designed with this in mind.

Volunteers and their colleagues have a significant role to play. If they can be happy with small achievements in the grand scheme of things, they will be people who are likely to continue contributing to change in a positive way.

A placement’s ‘success’ is not just about immediate tasks and goals, but about the future for the people who are coming together to make it work. It’s worth getting it right.
What do you need to know?

You have a right to get clear, free and unbiased information regarding country programmes and specific projects, about partners and about specific placements. Problems can arise if organisations are tempted to attract volunteers by raising unrealistic expectations about what they will achieve.

The images and messages used to portray people, places and situations in the developing world can have an enormous impact on people’s perceptions and attitudes. They are used in marketing to draw us towards particular things – whether a pristine beach with palm trees, or a small child who needs our help.

Marketing also sometimes emphasises the difference between the familiar (the west, us) and the strange or exotic other (them), creating a sense of two worlds. Our world can appear empty and materialistic when compared to the authentic, traditional other. This is mirrored in the way people may see mass tourism as less authentic than getting off the beaten track… including as volunteers.

However ‘othering’, as this is sometime termed, can also generate false impressions of need – perhaps combined with an unrealistic desire to ensure that culture and ethnicity are preserved.

One common failing is that the images and messages have not been constructed with the participation of the local community. Their involvement would allow for more diverse and honest images and messages to be communicated. Without it, misinterpretation and miscommunication can lead to inappropriate and ultimately unsuccessful volunteer programmes.

Knowing before you go

The more realistic your expectations, the easier your adaptation will be, the greater your contribution and the richer your experience. You should be able to understand what opportunities there will be for personal learning and development, for making a contribution, and what level of involvement there may be with local culture.

It is reasonable to expect to see a written policy setting out goals, how it works and describing roles and responsibilities. This demonstrates that the organisation are committed, consistent and clear about how they involve volunteers and helps ensure that everybody is clear about why volunteers are involved.

Matching you to an appropriate placement also includes helping you with your choices. They should help you to be clear about your own motivations, give you sufficient information about where you are going and what they expect you to be doing, and tell you about the challenges you might face. Clarity about all costs is also essential, including any extra expenses you might incur once you arrive. Organisations should offer appropriate training for your role, including in such things as health and safety and cultural awareness.

Recruitment

Amongst the information available should be a detailed and realistic description of the specific role for which you are applying. This should inform a clear and consistent procedure for selecting appropriate volunteers, including a thorough appraisal of suitability.

You should be informed if your application is unsuccessful and be offered feedback if you request it.

If you are interested in the way in which information is portrayed, the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development (CONCORD)’s 2006 ‘Code of Conduct on Images and Messages’ describes a range of guiding principles and can be accessed online.

Know before you go 4

What you need to do before departure

Have you read all the pre-departure information provided?
Do you know the exact schedule and what needs to be done by when?
Will you need a visa?
Will you need and vaccinations or medical tests?
Are you fully insured?
Can you visit the organisation (eg for a pre-departure briefing)?
Will any training include intercultural issues?
Can you learn a little of the local language?
Can You make a difference?

Many volunteering projects claim to make a difference by contributing to developmental goals. So what is meant by ‘development’ and are such claims credible?

In simple terms ‘development’ refers to the development of greater quality of life for humans. This can encompass a range of things including governance, healthcare, education, poverty reduction, gender equality, disaster preparedness, infrastructure, human rights, and the environment. Of course not all volunteering projects are developmental but, where they are, the key question for you is how volunteering might help. This is a challenge about which there is an extensive and ongoing debate.

UNDP state that ‘the basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives’. They also say that it is a ‘process of enlarging people’s choices’, the most critical ones being choices to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Other definitions also emphasise expanding people’s freedoms to live their lives as they choose, which touches on political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect.

Development goals therefore also encompass ways that people can take control of their lives and fulfil their own needs – ie the concept of empowerment. This is critical to understanding the complex political issues underlying even apparently straightforward volunteering projects.

Empowerment and Participation

Increasing emphasis on empowerment is reflected in changes in approaches to development over the last 60 years. The ‘top down’ approaches of the 1950s and 1960s, where donors tended to make decisions about strategy, have given way to participatory approaches where action and social change is led and shaped by the so-called ‘beneficiaries’ themselves. Achieving genuine participation remains a challenge though. Such things as political and organisational goals, funding constraints, the personal views of development experts, and so on all mean that power imbalances continue to exist. Certainly the view that beneficiaries of development are passive and reliant on external ‘expert’ knowledge – sometimes described as neocolonialism – is now discredited.

What can I really achieve?

Kathy Gill, Biosphere Expeditions

A vigorous debate about volunteering abroad has been developing over recent years as the numbers of organisations offering volunteering has expanded significantly. The choice is now enormous and we are encouraged to believe that in whatever way we want to help it will be possible. Things that we can’t effect in our home countries have become things that we can really ‘make a difference’ to abroad. The marketing shows us interesting places with people who need our help. We see groups of people like us in the photos laughing and enjoying doing good, and read text which encourage us to believe that we will not only enrich the lives of the people that we are going to support, but that our lives too will be enriched.

On the other side of the debate there is a growing swell of cynicism about what people can actually achieve through volunteering abroad and whether it isn’t all a misguided ego trip that only harms the host communities. Of course the reality is usually somewhere between these two extremes neither of which is likely to be the case except in rare instances.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT OUR VOLUNTEERING IS AT THE RIGHT END OF THE SPECTRUM?

The expectations that people have of an experience are absolutely critical to its success, both for the hosts and for the volunteer. These expectations must be set as firmly as possible in reality, and this is something that the volunteer and the sending organisation are both jointly responsible for. Here are three things for the potential volunteer to look out for to ensure that they are doing their part in making it all work.
involve local people
As a volunteer you cannot be expected to be an expert on the political, cultural and social complexities of a particular situation. However, it is reasonable to expect the organisation with whom you propose to volunteer to have such expertise, and to be able to demonstrate that programmes are set up to meet a purpose that has been identified by or with host partners and communities.

You certainly have a right to ask organisations to demonstrate tangible benefits to local people. Ask if there has been collaboration with a local partner in deciding what is to be done. Projects should be realistic and appropriate: they should be of the correct scale and technical level, culturally and socially suitable for the beneficiaries and sustainable, i.e. have benefits which continue in the long term.

This is not always easy. An apparently straightforward conservation project might be at odds with the needs of local people; volunteers could be doing jobs which local people might otherwise be paid to do; teaching English might be less efficient and sustainable than training local people to teach; building a medical centre will only be effective if there are staff to operate it and patients are able and willing to visit; and so on.

It is also important to look at the context of a particular project. Is it part of a programme of activities which is being informed by evaluation of previous work?

Learning and improvement of ongoing programmes – including with the participation of local people – is essential to ensuring a project remains relevant.

Monitor and evaluation
Constant monitoring of what is actually happening, together with periodic evaluations of overall progress are vital in keeping the work relevant to the needs and objectives of the community, and the goals of the volunteering organisation. It also helps the learning and development of volunteers.

Organisations should be able to provide information about previous projects and programmes, including monitoring and evaluation records. They should be continually interrogating the process of a project, the capacities of those carrying it out, and even the concept underlying it (assumptions can be wrong).

A further vital question is whether, even if a project has largely achieved what it set out to do, this will continue even if the volunteer organisation are no longer involved. Have capacities for pursuing the project been enhanced (i.e. learning for the stakeholders) and will the activities and outcomes lead to sustainable change?

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO 5
Understand the context
Do you know about the country and community – events, politics, climate, language, culture?

What makes your placement necessary? Think about global inequality, poverty and how ‘development’ might work here.

How did the project come about and how did they decide what to do?

Is there a long term programme of work?

Are people being empowered?

Manage your own expectations
Read the current debates online about volunteering abroad. There are many discussions about how much help you can be as a volunteer, what you can really expect to get out of it and how much you can actually make a difference. With so many organisations out there offering such a broad range of opportunities, it is good to really understand what your own motivations are to volunteer and make sure you match them with organisations that can really help you fulfil them. Make sure your expectations are realistic.

Look at how an organisation is trying to manage your expectations for you. All the marketing materials that are provided, from the photos on the website to the descriptions of each project, are designed to create an expectation in you of the experience that is being offered. Be aware of websites that over-sell. Be clear about what you believe you can offer to a project and compare it with what the websites say – do they match and are THEY realistic?

Dig deeper
To really know if an organisation does what it says it is going to do you need to look a bit deeper. Look for feedback from past-participants that is unregulated by the organisation (for example on social media). Ask the organisation about its impact on the ground – is a project locally instigated and how is the impact measured. And ask them what sort of information you will get before you go – are they helping you to fully understand what the experience will be like. The information that an organisation gives out, both as a matter of course and on request, will give you a very strong indication about the organisation itself as well as the volunteering opportunities that it offers.

Know that a lot of volunteering abroad is excellent for all concerned, but that some is pretty poor and that a tiny minority is actually harmful. Make sure you are going with a good understanding of what you are going to do, why you are going to do it, and that you are going with an organisation that you like and believe you can trust.
Being provided with training and support both before you go overseas, and once you arrive, is important in helping you to prepare yourself mentally, manage your expectations, and to consider how you might responsibly contribute both to your own placement and to social change more clearly.

Pre-departure training helps with the practical tasks and skills you will need on placement and also in understanding the context of the project: how it came about, who benefits and how it contributes to long-term sustainable change.

Training should also help clarify your expectations of your placement, preparing you to behave responsibly and appropriately. This can include how to engage with local people and how to approach cultural differences, as well as practical issues to do with accommodation, food, water and sanitation etc. Finally, it should cover health risks and how to stay safe on placements, including: what in-country support will be available, where to get help, emergency contacts, and so on. You should be offered advice and guidance in thinking about how your experience overseas will affect you and how well you will be able to adapt to the culture in the country you will be staying in.

There are a number of other benefits to pre-departure training, including giving you the chance to meet people who may be on placement with you, to talk to your UK manager, and to help you to get to know the organisation itself.

There should of course also be role-specific training such as how to use particular equipment or in child protection. If you are volunteering as a team leader you will of course need specific training and support appropriate to that role.

Overseas training

However thorough pre-departure training and information is, the reality of the situation on arrival can be confusing and challenging. It is therefore important for you to be given some form of induction or orientation by the local organisation or contact when you first arrive. This will help you in better understanding the partner organisation or community’s expectations of the placement, and give it context in the overall project or programme. Things such as cultural differences, language, local politics, and so on might also be covered. It is of course vital to have an introduction to staff, and to be provided with contacts for medical and emergency assistance including how to contact your in-country manager. You should have clear guidelines on who is responsible for what, and where your own responsibilities lie within the team.

You should expect to be given space and time to adjust to such things as changes in climate, and feelings of disorientation or homesickness and (if applicable) build relationships with other volunteers. You should of course know how to contact your family.

Finally, support should include the opportunity for you to comment on the quality and progress of your placement – to review and evaluate your experiences at regular intervals both formally and informally.
How much should you pay?

The costs of volunteering vary as much as the types of organisation offering placements. Whilst some may offer placements which are essentially free once you arrive, others expect you to pay thousands of pounds. So what are the real costs and where does the money go?

All placements cost money. Funding for them can come from various sources, including from the sending organisation itself, perhaps partly supported by grants or fundraising, or from fees charged to volunteers. There are enormous variations in the fees charged and it is important to understand what your fee is paying for.

Inevitably cheap may not be best! Your fee will probably be supporting the programme as a whole (e.g. project design and monitoring and evaluation). It should also cover any costs faced by local partner organisations as a result of your placement. And it should help to provide adequate support for you (e.g. safety and training).

Ask for a breakdown of how your fee will be spent. How much goes on overheads and administration costs? How much money goes directly to the host project or community?

Tourism Concern believe that all financial costs to host partners and communities need to be assessed and provision made to fully meet them. Is that the case and how is that reflected in the fee you pay? If possible, obtain clear figures for expenditure and not just a percentage.

Some organisations do offer a transparent public record of how funds are spent. Latitude for example give clear and detailed breakdowns of what you can expect on their website. For others you may have to make a specific request for clarification.

Having been given a price for the placement you are interested in, it is also advisable to question exactly what is included. An important part of knowing before you go is being aware of the costs you will face and drawing up a budget – including an amount for contingencies or emergencies.

What about flights, visas, insurance, vaccinations, specialist clothing and equipment? Will you pay for food, local transport, and other ‘extras’ once you are there?

Raising funds

Depending on your circumstances, you may have to consider raising some or all of the money before you go. Several organisations raise funds themselves and offer bursaries. Other possibilities include grant-making organisations, business sponsorship or fundraising activities. Do some research before getting in touch with potential funders – local contacts may work better than national ones for example. You might even be able to get publicity such as a local newspaper writing about your trip. Doing your own fundraising – organising a club night or doing a sponsored walk or swim for example, can be very effective.

Websites like www.justgiving.com can also help. Be aware though that some may be reluctant to give money for something they view as a holiday!

The people and places I experienced through Blue Ventures were a wonderful start to my journey towards becoming a published scientist. If I ever have kids, I’ll be sending them on a trip with you guys some day.

Geoff Hensgen, Blue Ventures, Madagascar
How safe will you be?

International volunteering often involves travelling a long way from home, to remote places with unfamiliar dangers and less healthcare provision than at home. Even the best sending organisation won’t be able to anticipate every situation and it is therefore vital that you follow guidance and be ready to take responsibility for your own mental and physical health and well-being.

It is clearly the responsibility of sending organisations to provide advice and guidance on how to avoid common risks and information on what local medical facilities are available. Nonetheless, it is your responsibility to follow that advice and behave appropriately.

How much responsibility a particular organisation is prepared to take for the health and safety of their volunteers varies considerably. It is vital that you are clear about what support you will have access to before you sign-up. Knowing that there will be an experienced person running the project, who can mentor you, may be an important factor in both safety and enjoyment if you are a less experienced traveller. Is there someone locally that you can turn to if things do not go according to plan, or worse still are starting to go wrong?

Organisations should, as a minimum, provide you with a support contact person or telephone number, and clearly define when this support can be accessed. Is there a 24-hour emergency contact telephone number?

Many volunteers do lone placements in remote communities. In these situations, you will need to be self-reliant, which in turn requires much more detailed preparation and planning both by you and the organisation.

Find out as much as you can about the local security situation before deciding to go. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) website has travel security advice and individual country profiles, including details of any common scams or crimes and any particular areas to avoid. See www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/travel-advice-by-country.

Ask your sending organisation for a copy of their risk assessment and safety management plan. If it looks fairly general, ask specifically about how the risks are managed on your project. Their response will tell you much about their attitude to

Showing interest in the local culture and traditions was … valuable in making a connection with the local people. Such interactions brought home to me a better combined appreciation of the land and people in the region including its special beauty and how reaching out to interact with the local community was both a rewarding experience and critical for future conservation and responsible development success.

Barry volunteered in Namibia with Biosphere Expeditions.
safety and what practical actions are taken to help you keep safe while volunteering.

If the organisation is based in the UK, ask if the health and safety management systems for your programme are compliant with the British Standard BS 8848 (see opposite). By stating that the programme is compliant with BS 8848, the organisation is making a commitment that good safety management procedures are in place for your programme, and that they will share these with you.

Of course, things can and do go wrong. So it is important to prepare for this eventuality. Find out what health insurance is in place while you are volunteering. Do you need to buy your own or any additional insurance? If you are travelling independently either before or after volunteering make sure your insurance covers you for what you will be doing.

What would happen if you needed to get back to the UK for any reason? Is this covered by your insurance? Are there written emergency response procedures for managing serious incidents (including medical emergencies, security risks, natural disasters etc)?

By knowing what the safety issues are and what help is available in the case of a major or minor incident, you will be in a much stronger position to decide if this is the right project for you.

BS 8848


Originally published in April 2007, BS8848 was developed in response to increased calls to make overseas adventure activities safer. Aimed at gap year travel organisations and providers of a range of adventurous holidays, including volunteering, it specifies requirements that have to be met to conform to best practice in managing safety. It includes a self-declaration checklist to enable organizations to carry out a thorough audit of their processes, mitigating risk wherever possible, and communicating this to customers.

The Standard can be used to help in the planning of successful ventures, provide assurance that venture providers are following good practice and managing the venture safely, and so reduce the likelihood of risk of injury or illness. It sets out safety requirements for all aspects of a venture from activities to transport, staffing and accommodation.

BS 8848 has three core principles:
1 informed choice: all risks should be assessed and clearly explained to participants before they book
2 single provider: there should be one organization that takes overall responsibility for the venture
3 Competent people: all ventures should be run by competent staff, or in the case of individual placements the venture provider’s primary responsibility is to satisfy itself that the volunteer is capable of undertaking the placement on their own.

BS 8848 compliant agencies should be willing to answer the following questions:
• Who will have overall responsibility for my safety while I am away?
• What will I be doing?
• What advice or training will I be given?
• What are the risks and how will these be minimised?
• What happens if I become ill or have an accident?
• Who, if anyone, will be supervising me?

BSI’s Parents’ Guide to BS 8848 can be found at: www.rgs.org/bsi

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO 8
Understand what protection you will get

Are there agreed emergency procedures?
Who will you contact if you have a problem?
Is in-country support available 4 hours a day?
How easy will it be to contact home – eg is there internet provision?
Does your organisation have your next of kin details?
Does your next of kin have your overseas contact details?
Do you have adequate health insurance?
Do you need to take any prescriptions or other medical supplies?
Are you familiar with any health & safety guidelines?
Will you be given a health and safety briefing?
Are there particular health or safety issues in the area where you are volunteering?
Do you risk exposure to excessive heat, cold, or other conditions?
Is there a risk from animals or insects?
Will you need a first aid kit?
Will you give your views?

Given the commitment expected of you it is only fair that your views and thoughts are listened to when you get back. You might be better at judging certain aspects of your project than managers back in the UK, and can certainly decisions about future work. You can also give valuable advice for future volunteers. It is also important that you are offered a debriefing and be allowed to reflect on the experience as well as pass on your views.

Ideally your feedback will be sought in a face-to-face debriefing session. Bringing together groups of volunteers for a joint debrief can also be helpful and should ideally have a formal aspect: filling an evaluation form for example. Did you enjoy your volunteering experience? Were you adequately supported? Do you need any additional support to follow up on issues raised by you experience? It is important for the organisation to show that they appreciate and value your contribution. Vitally, though, you can also contribute valuable information which helps inform future planning of projects and contributes to the learning cycle.

Debriefing returned volunteers

Talking to people after you return is a good way to help you process your responses to the experience. It might also give you information about how to stay involved, about volunteering within the UK, or helping with fundraising. Think about offering to help by talking to future volunteers.

Longer evaluations where a group of volunteers are given several days together can be particularly valuable in offering insight into how placements really function, whether local people are genuinely benefiting and whether support for the volunteers was adequate. This can of course include identifying what was done well!

Involving you in evaluating and analysing what happened, what did and didn’t work for you, what you enjoyed and what was less enjoyable, can also give the sending organisation feedback about the local partner organisation and how they feel about the work and hosting volunteers. Sending organisations should also ask for feedback from the host organisations themselves.

Finally, it is important that the organisation evaluates you as a volunteer. This might include discussing the specifics of your role with you; how successfully you performed these tasks; your strengths and weaknesses; and your flexibility, ease to work with, cultural sensitivity etc. This is useful for you, but also helps provide ideas for helping future volunteers.

Life after volunteering

The Humanitarian Centre, Guidelines for Sending Volunteers on Overseas Placements, 2009

Volunteers often return from a placement with strong feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, fulfillment, inspiration and with a passion to continue engaging with issues around international development. However, mixed in with these there may be other feelings of apprehension, fear, disillusionment, anger, helplessness, vulnerability or confusion. Debriefing for returned volunteers is about helping volunteers to recognise, identify and engage with all the emotions they may be feeling, and empowering them to make their own choices and decisions which result from their experiences.

Know before you go

Be prepared to share what you learn

Will you keep notes on what works well and what you struggle with on your placement?

Will you be willing to politely suggest things that might be improved?

Will you have a formal debriefing when your placement is over?

Are you willing to talk to any future volunteers?

Will you be involved in or support any related campaigning or fundraising activities at home?

Are you prepared for ‘reverse culture shock’?
Best practice for volunteering projects

Natasha Stein has a background in the international volunteering sector and travel industry and worked for VSO for 6 years. She is the founder of the website www.responsiblevolunteering.co.uk

SETTING THE STANDARD
In response to concerns over the validity of volunteer tourism projects, the level of support provided to volunteers and the benefits to local communities, there is now a movement towards developing best practice guidelines and standards for volunteering organisations. To achieve a standard an organisation normally has to go through a checking-process or audit whereas “best practice guidelines” tend to be more aspirational, with no external body formally checking they are complying. It is down to the organisation to self-assess and monitor themselves against the guidelines.

WHAT KIND OF BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES AND STANDARDS EXIST?
Tourism Concern has developed the Gap Year and International Volunteering Standard (GIVS), a code of practice for volunteering organisations with eight principles which cover all stages of the volunteering process. Each principle has a set of benchmarks and indicators.

Fair Trade Volunteering is a membership-based scheme which has five criteria which organisations need to meet to gain the Fair Trade Volunteering mark: a minimum local investment level above and beyond the volunteer’s time and work; a long term commitment to the project; clear and honest project descriptions and thorough volunteer preparation; in-country support; all volunteer expenses covered by the placement organisation so it doesn’t cost the local community anything to host volunteers. Any organisation which offers structured volunteering placements can apply and will need to show how they meet each criteria and provide references from partners and volunteers.

Comhlámh, the Irish development organisation, has a code of practice where volunteer-sending organisations based in Ireland can sign up to eleven principles relating to all aspects of volunteer programmes, from how projects are set-up, monitored and marketed to the level of support, preparation and debriefing given to volunteers. Organisations are required to conduct an annual self-audit to show how they are implementing the principles.

The Year Out Group, an association of UK gap year organisations, has a code of practice and operating guidelines for members, who include some of the largest volunteer-sending organisations. Their code of practice covers ethical considerations, for example ensuring that programmes benefit local communities both economically and socially.

The International Ecotourism Society has developed “International Voluntourism Guidelines for Commercial Tour Operators”, which is a practical tool to help organisations plan and manage their volunteering programmes in a responsible and sustainable manner.

The Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) are working with their members, commercial travel companies who offer volunteering placements, to ensure volunteer projects are sustainable and offer real long-term benefits for local communities.

THE CHALLENGES OF BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES
• With various different codes of practice available, will this reduce the impact? Could there be more co-operation between the above groups?
• Will schemes be recognisable to the public if only a handful of volunteer organisations sign up?
• Does a logo showing achievement of a standard affect the decision-making of prospective volunteers when choosing which organisation to volunteer with?
• What happens if a volunteer has a negative experience with an organisation that has achieved a standard? Would the organisation be liable for compensation or could they even be sued?
• How will these standards help to assess the development impact of volunteering projects? Can they give a voice to beneficiaries – the people and places that volunteers are hoping to make a positive contribution to?
• It is impossible to audit every single volunteering project on a regular basis or talk to local communities to assess the actual benefits and impact of the volunteering programmes.

HOW DO VOLUNTEERS CHOOSE AN ORGANISATION WHO IS COMMITTED TO BEST PRACTICE?
• Research organisations thoroughly before signing up.
• Ask the organisation lots of questions, for example: Do they work directly with local organisations and consult local people about the types of volunteer projects they develop? Do they have a process for monitoring and reviewing volunteer projects? Do they have a selection and matching process for volunteers? Do they provide pre-placement training and debriefing afterwards? Do they subscribe to any of the above schemes or codes of practice?
• Speak to former volunteers who have been on a similar placement with the organisation.
• Report bad practice. If you have a bad experience, complain to the organisation you volunteered with but also report them to trade bodies like ABTA in the UK or via forums and social media avenues.

It is clear is that volunteering organisations are demonstrating their commitment to making their projects beneficial to local communities and raising the standards for volunteers. The challenge now is whether these standards and guidelines will be adopted by organisations and if volunteers’ decision-making will be influenced by them.
Support Tourism Concern

Tourism Concern works to promote best practice in international volunteering, to maximise the beneficial developmental impacts in the communities where volunteering takes place, minimise the negative impacts, and to ensure volunteers have a worthwhile experience.

Join our network of Ethical Volunteers

Members gain access to invaluable advice and support including invites to exclusive events and copies of our reports. In addition all members receive discounts with our partners, including 15% off at Cotswold Outdoors, and reduced entry to our paid for events.

For more information go to www.tourismconcern.org.uk/volunteer

Volunteering Standards Group

Tourism Concern’s Volunteering Standards Group seeks to ensure that volunteering is a force for good by collaborating with international volunteering organisations who are passionate about ensuring volunteers have a worthwhile experience including by maximising the positive developmental outcomes of volunteering and working to minimise potential negative impacts.

For more information and a full list of ethical volunteering organisations, go to www.tourismconcern.org.uk/volunteer

This report has been produced with the kind help of:

Striving to increase understanding of responsible travel and cultural awareness. www.TRECtravelhealth.co.uk

Responsible investment advisers proud to sponsor Tourism Concern. www.gaia.co.uk

Volunteering in orphanages

For more than a year now Tourism Concern has been vigorously campaigning against any volunteering at orphanages. Far from helping, such visits can lead to inappropriate care for these vulnerable children and at times expose them to severe risk. It has even lead to the ‘creation’ of orphans to fulfil demand.

In recent years orphanages have increasingly become places which tourists choose to visit. They have also become ‘bucket list’ volunteering opportunities.

Whilst we appreciate that many well-meaning volunteers may wish to volunteer at an orphanage, our view is that looking after vulnerable children should be undertaken by local, full-time, professional staff and not by short-term volunteers, no matter how skilled or qualified. The demand for orphanage visits has also led to significant numbers of ordinary children being turned into ‘orphans’ and being unnecessarily separated from their families.

In the UK there are at least 30 tour operators who offer such visits. We have written to them all, urgently demanding that they stop sending tourists and unqualified volunteers to orphanages.

Read about our campaign at www.tourismconcern.org.uk/orphanages