HOW SHOULD ANTHROPOLOGISTS BE THINKING ABOUT VOLUNTEER TOURISM?

By Elizabeth Garland

Lately it seems as if students at the liberal arts college where I teach are always about to head off to build a library in Ghana, have just returned from volunteering at an orphanage in South Africa, or are busy raising money for a water project in Ethiopia. As an anthropologist specializing in African environment and development issues, I have been delighted to see young people interested in a part of the world that means so much to me, but I am also increasingly troubled by the sense that working first-hand on African poverty has become a kind of credential for these (mostly American, mostly privileged) students, a box to be checked off in their preparation for success within the global economy. My lack of generosity toward them perhaps derives from the fact that so few students involved with Africa turn up in my courses on African culture and history. Sometimes volunteering in Africa inspires students to go on to take courses in African studies, but often it does not; and few seem to regard the kind of broad-based, contextual knowledge that I consider crucial to my own understanding of poverty (and everything else) on the continent to be a prerequisite before undertaking work there.

In this essay I explore the social and political implications of the phenomenon increasingly referred to as volunteer tourism—the practice in which, I suggest, students like the ones from my college are engaged when they travel to volunteer in places like Ghana and South Africa. I begin by describing the rise and scope of the global volunteer tourism industry and then discuss some of its pros and cons. I conclude by asking how volunteer tourism might be done better rather than worse, and then make some specific recommendations for those involved with develop-

Tourist Volunteer Helps Out in a Rice Field in Tanzania

ing volunteer tourism programs and for teachers charged with advising or selecting students wishing to volunteer abroad.

The Rise of the Volunteer Tourism Industry

Traveling to other, poorer societies in order to help people is hardly a new phenomenon. Today's "voluntourists" stand on the shoulders of generations of missionaries, colonial bureaucrats, and development workers. The idea that one might pay money to volunteer overseas, however, is a relatively recent development. The concept was pioneered in the 1970s by the Earthwatch Institute, but so-called voluntouring did not really catch on at a significant scale until the 1990s, when the institution of the British gap year exploded onto the scene. Geared to young, university-bound people in the gap between high school and college,

the idea of a gap year has been for students to take some time off, mature a bit, see the world, and do something useful that will both "give something back" and distinguish them from their peers in their eventual careers and lives. As early as the 1980s, the desires of Western young people to travel for a while before settling down into adulthood had already translated into a consolidated backpacker niche within the international tourism industry (Huxley 2003; Wheeler and Wheeler 2005). What happened in the 1990s was that tour companies began to harness the spirit of off-the-beaten-path adventure associated with backpacking, and to package and market products that promised similar experiences, in terms that sounded safe and educational enough to appeal to parents. Today, most gap-year participants are middle and upper-middle class British and Australian 18-20 year-olds, whose trips are financed primarily by their parents (Heath 2007; Simpson 2004). Today's

gap year students are catered to by dozens of for-profit companies, offering a wide range of more- or less-chaperoned, structured international experiences. A typical mid-sized company is the UK-based Africa/Asia/Americas Venture (Africa & Asia Venture 2007), which describes itself with the slogan "Total Adventure With a Purpose." Many gap year programs are set in developing countries and very often include a service or volunteer component.

From the perspective of the countries playing host to such programs, the rapid expansion in the 1990s of

of the broader tourist market in places like Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Today, tourists of all ages pay to volunteer in poor countries, with parents sometimes bringing their children with them, as entire families spend their holidays working at orphanages, building latrines or schools, or working on environmental cleanup projects. According to a 2006 survey conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America, 24% of Americans surveyed reported interest in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation (eTN 2006).

ists and generating revenue for tour operators. Advocates note that volunteer projects bring development benefits to peoples and regions that would likely not receive them otherwise, and positive claims are often also made for the powerful effects the practice has on the tourists who participate in it. Advocates within the scholarly community, and virtually everyone involved in the industry itself, contend that voluntouring expands the cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity of participants, promoting transnational connection and understanding in the global era (e.g., Palacios 2010; Wearing 2001).

In contrast, those coming from a more skeptical perspective have argued that volunteer tourism programs build upon and reinforce existing inequalities, preconceptions, and stereotypes (e.g., Heath 2007; Huxley 2003; Raymond and Hall 2008; Simpson 2004). The industry is, after all, premised on the idea that one person's impoverishment or environmental degradation is another's opportunity for adventure and personal growth, rendering the structural inequities that characterize many host/guest encounters a fundamental and necessary feature of this sort of tourism. Indeed, although volunteer tourism programs are ostensibly about addressing the problems of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, publicity advertising them often emphasizes the benefits—including the economic benefits—the programs bring to the tourists, rather than to their hosts (Heath 2007). Volunteer in Africa's website asks, for example,

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Western young people interested in volunteering overseas dovetailed perfectly with their own changed political-economic circumstances due to global neoliberal reform. As states undergoing macroeconomic "adjustment" in the late 1980s and 1990s devalued currencies and scaled back government support for healthcare, education, and infrastructure, absolute living standards across the developing world deteriorated precipitously for those at the lower ends of the socio-economic spectrum. The poor objectively got poorer during this time, and their "neediness" more apparent to the Western gaze. The neoliberal retreat of the state also enabled and called into being an explosion in non-governmental organizations globally, providing a ready institutional framework for international volunteering that had not existed previously. The volunteers were eager to help, the NGOs happy for the infusions of free labor and resources, the tour operators happy to profit by connecting the two, and the volunteer tourism industry was born, quickly growing well beyond the gap year to carve out a robust chunk

The Potential and Drawbacks of Volunteer Tourism

The scholarly literature on volunteer tourism is broadly divided between authors who are hopeful about the phenomenon, and those critical of the industry. Typical in the first camp is Stephen Wearing, whose book, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences That Make a Difference* (2001), argues that volunteer tourism represents a more self-conscious, meaningful, and sustainable form of tourist practice, one in which the emphasis is on altruism and giving back, rather than on consumption and profit-making. For sustainable and ethical tourism advocates, volunteer tourism has appeared to be an exciting new means of harnessing the resource flows that underpin the tourism industry more generally—flows of disposable time and money in particular—in order to benefit the earth and the world's disadvantaged people. Volunteer tourism, in this view, is a basically pain-free mechanism for redistributing global resources, one that betters the world, while simultaneously fulfilling the desires of tour-

> Are you looking for ways to make a difference while gaining relevant work experience to add to your resume? Do you want to learn new skills? Do you want to explore potential career areas? You can accomplish all of this, and more, by becoming a volunteer in Africa! Doing volunteer work in Africa can be one of the most rewarding and best investments you can make with your time. [Volunteer in Africa 2012]

As rhetoric like this makes clear, while poor people may be helped by such programs, addressing the broader inequalities between them and the Western volunteers is not a primary objective of the industry. On the contrary, these programs offer volunteers a means to improve their own marketability and socioeconomic power, potentially increasing, rather than diminishing, the inequality between them and those they set out to aid.

The contention that volunteer touring promotes meaningful cross-cultural understanding also largely fails to bear up to scrutiny. Rather than emphasizing the importance of learning about other cultures, industry discourse downplays the challenges of navigating cultural differences, typically promising positive, unproblematic cross-cultural encounters. Advertising materials assure tourists that they will be welcomed with open arms by their hosts, who are depicted in simple, stereotypic terms as needy cultural others, generic poor people eager and grateful for the assistance of benevolent Westerners (Huxley 2003; Simpson 2004). Such rhetoric is particularly explicit in volunteer programs in Africa, where ubiquitous images of poverty, disease, and suffering children (particularly AIDS orphans, which have become almost talismanic of the industry) have positioned the region as a global symbol of undifferentiated need. Programs rarely provide tourists with the background information about underlying causes and local complexities necessary to get beyond such stereotypes, and interviews with returned volunteers show that most return home with their pre-existing beliefs confirmed rather than challenged (Huxley 2003; Simpson 2004). Simpson reports that, in the absence of information on the origins and nature of global inequalities, volunteers often employ a kind of "lotto logic" (2004:689) to explain the poverty they encounter on their travels, concluding that some people are poor, and others wealthy, by simple luck of the draw. Another theme frequently articulated by volunteers is the acceptance of poverty by the poor people they have met while abroad:

They don't know any better and they haven't had what we have so to them that's quite normal and they're quite happy being like that. [Interviewee, Raymond and Hall 2008:538]

As Mathers (2010) has recently argued, this sort of bland, humanist appreciation for poor others obscures and depoliticizes the historical circumstances that have produced their poverty. In lieu of engaging with the histories and complexities of local contexts, volunteers tend instead to focus on the lessons they have learned about themselves, their own identities and senses of self worth shored up through their encounter with needy cultural others. The effect is particularly acute in Africa, where an abundance of well-worn colonial and missionary, and, of late, celebrity narratives provide Western tourists with vivid scripts for their own fantasy roles in the continent's salvation (Mathers 2010).

The actual effects that volunteer tourism programs have had on the sites where they are run, in Africa and elsewhere, have not yet been seriously studied by tourism scholars. What limited research has been done suggests that the impacts are far less positive than often asserted. Since the vast majority of volunteers are effectively unskilled with respect to the tasks they end up performing, most often as manual construction laborers or childcare providers, they risk competing with local unskilled workers for the jobs in question, driving down local wages and taking away work from people who are typically among the poorest members of their societies (Richter 2010). Many critics have also argued that volunteer-driven development projects foster dependency among beneficiary populations and undermine a sense of local ownership, since they are implemented by outsiders, rather than by the local population itself (Burns and Barrie 2005; Huxley 2003; McGehee and Andereck 2009; Palacios 2010; Raymond and Hall 2008). To this I would add that the regular arrival of wealthy, Western volunteers in poor, non-Western communities seem likely to reinforce

Student Volunteers Visit an Orphanage in Tanzania

people's sense of relative poverty and marginality, heightening their consciousness of their place in an unequal world system in which some are able to give aid, and others are resigned to roles as aid-recipients. Such inequities can only be made more glaring by the fact that many volunteer tourists are young and often female, and yet possess the kind of global mobility to which many disaffected, underemployed youth throughout the developing world aspire.

Harms can arise from volunteer tourism as well, as a result of the industry's insensitivity to the cultural norms and priorities, and even the emotional and medical needs, of the populations it targets. Projects that focus on youth education through school building or English language instruction may not reflect the alternative priorities that older members of the society possess, such as land acquisition or livestock holding. Resources lavished on children and young adults can also undermine the influence of elders as valued leaders in the community (Burns and Barrie 2005). Similarly, programs emphasizing women's and girls' empowerment may run up against deeply-engrained gender norms, and yet the short-term, shallow structure of the tourism experience seldom allows volunteers to gain any sort of nuanced sense of the cultural stakes of the social changes they are promoting. Western cultural norms are often assumed to be universal and promoted as unproblematically desirable (Huxley 2003; Raymond and Hall 2008; Simpson 2004).

The temporary nature of most volunteer tourism programs poses particular problems in the context of the thriving AIDS orphan tourism industry. Recent research from South Africa has shown that the regular arrival and departure of short-term foreign volunteers in orphanages actively contributes to the attachment difficulties of these already vulnerable children. As one social worker notes, "Children in orphanages tend to approach all adults with the same level of sociability and affection, often clinging to caregivers, even those encountered for the first time only moments before" (Richter 2010:para 16). Volunteer tourists are able to connect quickly with such children, and many describe being moved by the intensity and intimacy of the bonds they form with them. When they leave, a few weeks or months later, however, "the children they leave behind have experienced another abandonment to the detriment of their short- and long-term emotional and social development" (Richter 2010:para 18). An additional concern is that African children cared for by a succession of Western strangers may over time come to associate all good things with foreigners, rather than with members of their own societies, posing challenges for their social integration and self-esteem over the longer term.

Finally, volunteer tourism programs can also pose challenges for the governments of the countries in which they take place. While a steady stream of tourists willing to undertake basic development work reduces pressure on taxed government social welfare and development agencies, it also arguably undermines, if not the capacity of these agencies to provide such services, then at the least the public rationale mandating that they do so. In this way, volunteer tourism can be said to weaken the state institutions of poor countries, posing problems for sustainability and governance in the longer term. Further, because volunteer tourists often travel and reside outside the bounds of formal tourism industries by staying in villages rather than hotels, and eating in local homes or establishments rather than in

tourist restaurants, states capture less revenue from them than they do from more typical international tourists. Government officials also struggle to plan for and manage volunteers' impact within the national tourism sector. Citing concerns about both the economic costs and undesired social consequences associated with increased international volunteering, the Government of Tanzania has recently established a special visa category for volunteers. It charges them a very high fee and demands resumes and other documentation before granting them work permits, in the hopes of reducing their numbers, dissuading unskilled volunteers from coming, and more effectively monitoring and capturing revenue from those that do.

Toward More Responsible Volunteer Tourism

What this brief review suggests is that, in spite of its positive potential and rapidly growing popularity, volunteer tourism is associated with significant negative consequences for both host populations, and, at least in some regards, tourists themselves. There are, of course, powerful political-economic and ideological forces that have molded the industry into its current form, and given the profitability of the formula, its basic structure is not likely to be reformed easily. Still, there does seem to be clear room for improvement in the way volunteer tourism is currently being practiced, and, hence, a role for anthropologists to play in pushing the industry in a better direction. By way of conclusion, I highlight below three of the core issues and point to ways these might begin to be ameliorated.

I would suggest that the most fundamental problem with volunteer tourism is simply the nature of the tourist desire to volunteer in a poor country in the first place. Crass thoughts of building resumes and gaining pre-professional credentials through international slumming are clearly self-serving and, I would argue, morally suspect. But even if we accept

that most international volunteers are primarily motivated less by self-interest than by a genuine desire to learn about other places and do something to atone for and address global inequalities, the structural inequities of the industry remain problematic. The basic assumption by volunteers that they are qualified to work on the problems of people they have never met and know little about, simply by virtue of their own national, racial, or class backgrounds, reflects an inherent presumption of superiority on the part of the tourists that forecloses meaningful equality between them and their "hosts" from the outset. Instead of fostering connections between equals, in which assistance and learning are anticipated to flow in both directions, most volunteer tourism encounters are premised on the expectation of a more or less one-way transaction (build their school, dig their latrine, take care of their orphans) that distances volunteers from the people with whom they come into contact. That tourists accumulate colorful stories and imagery from these people along the way may create an illusion of cross-cultural intimacy, but does little to close this structural gap.

For volunteer tourism to move closer to its ideal as a vehicle for truly meaningful cross-cultural learning and connection, volunteer tourists need to start from a position not of superiority, but rather of humility and openness. A good first step in this direction would be for institutions sponsoring such programs to frame volunteering less as an occasion to "give something back," which is the current industry refrain, than an opportunity to get to know a new part of the world, and to learn how people with different cultural perspectives and material resources live. Since systemic poverty and other intractable problems are virtually never solved through the efforts of short-term volunteers, volunteer programs should be recast as a means for volunteers to learn how such problems came to be the way they are, and how local people envision and hope for their eventual resolution. Armed with such knowledge, volunteers would

then be well-equipped to have a more far-reaching impact on the problems that concern them, should they desire to continue working on them once they return home.

Reframing volunteering primarily as an opportunity for learning, rather than development work, brings me to the second big problem with much current volunteer tourism, namely, that it is so frequently carried out by people with an almost total lack of prior knowledge about the places they wish to go or the lives of the people they seek to assist. Ignorance of such things diminishes volunteers' understanding of what is happening around them while they are in the field, undermines their ability to appreciate and respect local cultural mores and institutions, and increases the likelihood that they will retreat into their own, pre-existing belief systems about human behaviors and motivations. To counter such tendencies, programs that sponsor volunteer tourism ventures, and the institutions and individuals that guide potential volunteers toward them, should emphasize the importance of preparation, including language training, prior to travel, and should provide adequate orientation once in country. Colleges and professors should require relevant coursework of students seeking their endorsement to go on volunteer programs, and should encourage returned student volunteers to combine the first-hand knowledge they have gained with further exploration of the contexts they have visited through coursework and independent reading and research.

Finally, to address concerns about the impact of volunteer tourism projects on local communities and host countries, sponsoring organizations, including colleges and NGOs, as well as for-profit tourism agencies, need to build an awareness of the importance of local ownership, cultural appropriateness, and sustainability into their programs from the outset. Efforts should be made to respect and, where possible, work through host country governments and civil society organizations, and to coordinate volunteer projects with local agencies in ways that support, rather than undermine, their capacities and missions. In general, volunteer programs should fit with local and national priorities, and, if volunteers do not have skills that would make them directly beneficial to these objectives, their energies should be redirected elsewhere, for example toward fundraising within their own countries in support of an NGO in the country in question.

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