

Voluntourism Uncovered:  
Toward a Standard for Meaningful Work

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT.....	3
BACKGROUND OF VOLUNTOURISM.....	5
CRITICISMS.....	10
PRIVILEGE AND THE WHITE SAVIOR INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX.....	10
ORIGINS IN THE GLOBAL NORTH.....	12
LOW IMPACT AND DEPENDENCY.....	13
RESPONSIBLE VOLUNTEERING MODEL.....	16
CRITERIA FOR RESPONSIBLE VOLUNTEERING.....	18
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?.....	23
MATERIALS.....	25
GENERAL PRESENTATION.....	26
WEBSITE ARTICLE.....	34
NEWSLETTER ARTICLE.....	38
GRAPHIC.....	39
MATERIALS FOR STUDY ABROAD OFFICES.....	41
INFO SESSION PRESENTATION.....	41
HANDOUT.....	48
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

## Introduction to the Project

In our increasingly globalized world, young adults are encouraged to be involved in activities that transform them into “global citizens.” Although being a “global citizen” contains many facets, there are a couple of aspects that stand out the most. First, these activities revolve around service and giving back to the community. Secondly, to truly be a global citizen, young adults are encouraged to leave their hometowns and travel abroad. Because of the increased pressure to be a global citizen, more and more opportunities and programs are arising, claiming to help one become just that. The focus of this project specifically is volunteer tourism, otherwise known as voluntourism.

Voluntourism is the act of travelling to underdeveloped locations with an organized group to perform service work in that location.<sup>1</sup> Trips and projects typically last anywhere between a week and three months, making it an attractive option for many people to explore the world and help others while they are on a school break, for example. Most participants are college students and young adults, although retirees and those looking for a career break are also volunteering, with most of these participants originated from western regions such as the United States, Canada, and Europe.<sup>2</sup> This trend has only recently become popular and has been an increasingly lucrative business in the past few years, and there is estimated to be more than one million voluntourists going abroad from the United States each year.<sup>3</sup> Also known by other terms

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen L Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences that Make a Difference* (Oxon: CABI, 2001); Cori Jakubiak, "Ambiguous Aims: English-language Voluntourism as Development," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 15, no. 4 (2016): 245, <https://doi-org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/10.1080/15348458.2016.1195270>; Daniel A. Guttentag, "The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism," *International Journal of Tourism Research* 11, no. 6 (March 2009): 538. <https://doi-org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/10.1002/jtr.727>.

<sup>2</sup> Carrie Kahn, "As 'Voluntourism' Explodes in Popularity, Who's it Helping the Most," *NPR*, July 31, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2014/07/31/336600290/as-volunteerism-explodes-in-popularity-whos-it-helping-most>.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Tiessen. *Learning and Volunteering Abroad for Development* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 26.

such as “volunteer vacation,” “mini-mission,” “pro-poor tourism,” “vacation volunteering,” “altruistic tourism,” and “service-based vacation,” more and more Western volunteers are embarking on these types of trips.<sup>4</sup>

The trend of voluntourism has only recently gained academic attention, and as a result, we are now aware of the many of criticisms surrounding it. I decided to undertake this project not only to try to understand the criticisms behind the trend that is supposed to be “giving back to the community” but also to raise awareness of the possible implications of volunteering abroad. As university students are given more and more options and incentives to volunteer abroad, it is important to do our best to mitigate the potential negative effects that a voluntourism program can have on a host community. Through my research I have noticed that some companies are very aware of the criticisms of voluntourism and have already made efforts toward mitigating potential negative effects, however, other companies have no indication that their projects could potentially be doing more harm than good.

Until some sort of a standard can be established that can keep voluntourism companies accountable, it is up to the consumer to make responsible and informed decisions. By generating a list of criteria to look for while searching for programs, as well as information sheets and articles to share with study abroad offices and beyond, I hope to increase the dialogue surrounding voluntourism and its impacts. I know that voluntourism will continue to be a popular way to travel, especially among college students, and that the industry is not necessarily going to disappear due to criticisms. It is therefore important to bring these conversations to the forefront, especially in locations where the target demographic can be found. The following

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<sup>4</sup> Li Ju Chen and Joseph S. Chen, "The motivations and expectations of international volunteer tourists: A case study of “Chinese Village Traditions”," *Tourism Management* 32, no. 2 (April 2011): 435. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2010.01.009>.

resources and materials have been created with the goal of promoting responsible volunteer tourism.

To generate these criteria for responsible volunteering abroad, I first completed an extensive literature review of the voluntourism industry and its potential consequences. This review consisted of both academic journal articles and articles written by past participants of voluntourism experiences. Through this I was able to determine some of the leading criticisms of the industry. In addition, I used a content analysis of voluntourism program websites to examine how they present themselves and how opportunities are marketed to potential participants. I was able to see how aware, clear, and transparent some companies are about their programs, ethics, and projects, while others offer little to no information regarding their practices. This information is valuable to for potential participants so that they can find the best program that fits both their needs and the needs of the host community. Without awareness and openness in the industry itself, participants are faced with more difficult decisions about which program to choose, thereby perhaps inadvertently contributing to the negative impacts of the industry.

### **Background of Voluntourism**

As mentioned above, voluntourism is a type of tourism where participants volunteer their time contributing to some sort of “development work.” Typical projects that participants are involved in include construction and development, community welfare, child care in orphanages, health care, conservation and environmental work, and education, to list a few, over the course of a week or so.<sup>5</sup> Voluntourism in itself is different from development work and development volunteering, although some of the project areas may overlap. Development work typically

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<sup>5</sup> Jakubiak, "Ambiguous Aims," 245; Guttentag, "Negative Impacts," 538.

involves a longer period of time, remuneration, higher levels of community engagement, sector-specific skills, and language skills, while voluntourism does not necessarily require any of these.<sup>6</sup> Although not examined in this project, there are also other forms of tourism and “development work” that could potentially fall under the “voluntourism” designation, including short-term religious mission work and certain internships abroad. It is also important to note that voluntourism is not limited to international experiences, and that participants can volunteer on similar programs within their own countries, however, this project focuses on international voluntourism experiences.<sup>7</sup> Of these, 92% of voluntourism projects take place in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, with Africa having more organizations that offer programs than anywhere else.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the nature of this type of tourism, it has been increasing in popularity, especially among young adults, although the trend has been extended to retirees and businesses who want to participate in team-building activities.<sup>9</sup> According to Banki and Schonell, “From the US alone, it has been estimated that colleges and universities send over 6000 students abroad every year for volunteer trips.”<sup>10</sup> Some academic research has focused on participant motivations for joining voluntourism projects. These motivations can include the obvious altruistic desire to “do good”

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<sup>6</sup> Colleen McGloin and Nichole Georgeou, “‘Looks Good on Your CV’: The Sociology of Voluntourism Recruitment in Higher Education,” *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 2 (June 2016): 405. doi:10.1177/1440783314562416.

<sup>7</sup> Natalie Jesionka, “The Reality of Voluntourism and the Conversations We’re Not Having,” *The Muse*, <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-reality-of-voluntourism-and-the-conversations-were-not-having>.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Banki and Richard Schonell, “Voluntourism and the Contract Corrective,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 8 (2018): 1477, <https://doi-org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/10.1080/01436597.2017.1357113>; Eric Hartman, Cody Morris Paris, and Brandon Blache-Cohen, “Fair Trade Learning: Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism,” *Tourism and Hospitality Research* 14, no. 1–2 (January 2014): 108, doi:10.1177/1467358414529443.

<sup>9</sup> Tina Rosenberg, “The Business of Voluntourism: Do Western Do-Gooders Actually Do Harm?” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/13/the-business-of-voluntourism-do-western-do-gooders-actually-do-harm>.

<sup>10</sup> Banki and Schonell, “Contract Corrective,” 1475.

and help others, as well as a desire to travel and experience other cultures.<sup>11</sup> However, Banki and Schonell found that “volunteers are not necessarily driven by good-will and a can-do attitude, but are discerning consumers who carefully choose their field of activity and expect a fundamentally self-interested return on their investment, whether it be in the form of self-actualisation, work experience, Facebook profile picture or college reference.”<sup>12</sup> The underlying motivations that Banki and Schonell note are things that the media point to when criticizing voluntourism.<sup>13</sup> One prominent example of this is the satirical Instagram account “Barbie Savior” (<https://www.instagram.com/barbiesavior/?hl=en>), which posts images of Barbie volunteering in rural Africa with captions showing how she feels like she is saving the world with the staged photographs (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1. Barbie Savior Instagram post from May 24, 2016.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/BFy\\_ww2MfT9/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/BFy_ww2MfT9/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>11</sup> Tiessen, *Learning and Volunteering*, 35-36, 38-39; Wearing, “Volunteer Tourism.”

<sup>12</sup> Banki and Schonell, “Contract Corrective,” 1477.

<sup>13</sup> Malaka Gharib, “Volunteering Abroad? Read This Before You Post That Selfie,” *NPR*, November 26, 2017.  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/11/26/565694874/volunteering-abroad-read-this-before-you-post-that-selfie>.



Figure 2. Barbie Savior Instagram post from September 22, 2016.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/BKrHVrKjXoA/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/BKrHVrKjXoA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

Moving on from motivations, voluntourism programs are somewhat limited and directed at a certain demographic. Participants tend to be those who can afford the program fees, flights, visas, and time spent away from work or school.<sup>14</sup> Although some programs offer scholarships to some participants, a two-week long “meaningful” program can cost around \$2,000, which does not include airfare and various other expenses.<sup>15</sup> Typically the program fees go toward administration, marketing, accommodation and food, site leaders, and other expenses. Some companies do a very good job at being clear about where the fees go and what is included in them, but other companies are not very transparent regarding costs. It is also argued that much of the money that voluntourists pay to their programs does not end up in the host communities

<sup>14</sup> Chen and Chen, "Motivations and expectations," 437.

<sup>15</sup> Jakubiak, "Ambiguous Aims," 245; McGloin and Georgeou, “Looks Good on Your CV,” 408.



because the companies themselves may own all the transportation, accommodation, and other facilities in country that are used throughout the trip, putting all profits back in their hands.<sup>16</sup> Another criticism is that volunteers spend most of their money on travel and accommodation, when that money could presumably do more good if it were given directly to the communities that they intend to help, rather than toward travel to distant locations only to spend less than one month there.<sup>17</sup>

The marketing strategies of voluntourism companies is perhaps one of the more noticeable effects of the industry to those who are not directly involved in projects abroad. Common slogans and tagline include “travel with a purpose” or “make a difference in the world,” which not only is different from the ideas behind traditional tourism, but it also assumes that voluntourism is morally better than traditional tourism, as well as more “authentic.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the phrase “make a difference,” is extremely vague and could mean anything, although in many instances it implies that the difference being made is positive and beneficial.<sup>19</sup> This type of advertising is “linked the phenomenon to the ‘affective economy’ or ‘moral market’, which, through its appeal to emotion, problematically reduces complex issues of structural injustice to questions of individual morality that can be solved simply.”<sup>20</sup> Marketing is often much focused on the volunteer experience, rather than the impact that volunteers have on the

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<sup>16</sup> Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg, "The Business of Voluntourism"; Hargn Luh Sin, "Who are we responsible to? Locals' tales of volunteer tourism." *Geoforum* 41, no. 6 (November 2010): 984. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2010.08.007>; Guttentag, "Negative Impacts," 539.

<sup>18</sup> Sin, "Who are we responsible to?" 984; Carlos M. Palacios, "Volunteer Tourism, Development and Education in a Postcolonial World: Conceiving Global Connections Beyond Aid." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 18, no. 7 (2010): 874. <https://doi-org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/10.1080/09669581003782739>; McGloin and Georgeou, "'Looks Good on Your CV,'" 406; Ben Wilkinson, Judith McCool, and Genevieve Bois, "Voluntourism: an analysis of the online marketing of a fast-growing industry," *International Journal of Communication and Health* 4 (2014): 13. <https://communicationandhealth.ro/upload/number4/WILKINSON-MCCOOL-BOIS.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> McGloin and Georgeou, "'Looks Good on Your CV,'" 411; Tiessen, *Learning and Volunteering*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Banki and Schonell, "Contract Corrective," 1477.

host communities and locations, trying to appeal to potential participants through how they can benefit from the experience.<sup>21</sup> More about the specific functions and details of advertising and marketing is in the following sections.

### **Criticisms**

The voluntourism industry is continually evolving and changing. Some companies are aware of their impacts and have made efforts to counteract them, while others show little evidence that they are aware of the criticisms. The following list is a starting point for some of the criticisms that researchers have regarding volunteer tourism and its impacts, but the list is by no means complete. As more and more research is completed and companies change their programs and ethics, some of these criticisms may become obsolete and new criticisms will arise. The following list is in no particular order of importance.

#### **Privilege and the White Savior Industrial Complex**

Neo-colonialism, privilege, and race are common criticisms when discussing not only voluntourism, but also international development in general because individuals from the West are often the ones who are participating in this sort of work. Especially when concerning younger, inexperienced volunteers who may not have a background in issues surrounding development, volunteers may have attitudes where they believe that they are the solution to the problems in the developing world. According to Cole, many voluntourists have the mentality of

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<sup>21</sup> McGloin and Georgeou, “Looks Good on Your CV,” 409, 414; Doug Cutchins, and Anne Geissinger, *Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012) xix; Wilkinson, McCool, and Bois, “Analysis of the online marketing,” 14.

“we have to save them because they can’t save themselves.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, the fact that many volunteers are coming from the West means that they are already coming from a system of privilege that allows them to take the time off and spend thousands of dollars to leave their homes and volunteer abroad.

The White Savior Industrial Complex is a term coined by Teju Cole in 2012 in an article for *The Atlantic*.<sup>23</sup> It is the idea that “a nobody from American or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied.”<sup>24</sup> Many researchers since then have echoed these ideas that many volunteers believe that it is up to them to save and rescue those people who are less privileged than them.<sup>25</sup> This mindset, in term, promotes various binaries and stereotypes of the “developed” and “underdeveloped,” the “privileged” and “underprivileged,” and more.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Palacios argues that voluntourism “tends to reproduce the same global patterns of inequality and poverty, leaving intact – if not reinforcing – the dominant position of the North.”<sup>27</sup>

The binaries that arise with voluntourism also contribute to the idea of the “Other.” Without proper training on cultural norms and beliefs, it can “[fail] to bridge the empathy gap, and [reinforce] negative, potentially even racist, stereotypes.”<sup>28</sup> Volunteers are often separated from host communities not only physically through separate accommodation, but also through linguistic and cultural barriers. There is an emphasis that is placed on participant comfort, which in turn can lead to good reviews for the company, so volunteers are not exposed to some of the

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<sup>22</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.” *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>23</sup> Cole, “White-Savior.”

<sup>24</sup> Cole, “White-Savior.”

<sup>25</sup> Sin, “Who are we responsible to?” 984.

<sup>26</sup> McGloin and Georgeou, ““Looks Good on Your CV,”” 409.

<sup>27</sup> Palacios, “Volunteer Tourism, Development and Education, 864.

<sup>28</sup> Banki and Schonell, “Contract Corrective,” 1477; McAllum and Zahra, “The positive impact,” 294.

hardships of life in the host community, “eat different food, and try not to be a burden on host communities and therefore don’t integrate.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, participants are distant from host communities and do not experience the cross-cultural interconnectedness that many of them hope to experience. Voluntourism locations essentially become “zoos” for viewing the Other. The online marketing of some companies demonstrates the differences between “us” and “them” by depicted participants helping the “exotic poor” and promising an authentic experience.<sup>30</sup>

### Origins in the Global North/Who Decides Who Gets to be Helped?

As mentioned above, the global north is seen as being the beneficiary of the voluntourism industry. Most voluntourism organizations are based in the global north, which means that they are influenced by the core values of the north.<sup>31</sup> Not only does the funding for the projects first go through these organizations, but they are focused on projects that the West believes the rest of the world needs, implying that locals are ignorant to their own state.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the companies get to determine who gets to be helped because they have control over the situation, which can create tensions in host communities. Any project undertaken will automatically “benefit particular groups in the community more than others” when it is decided who is most in need, even though the discrimination is unintentional.<sup>33</sup> As a result, there will always be a group that is poorer than another, and projects could potentially switch back and forth between groups that they deem most in need, leaving those communities in a worse state than before.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> McAllum and Zahra, “The positive impact,” 299.

<sup>30</sup> McGloin and Georgeou, “Looks Good on Your CV,” 407.

<sup>31</sup> Nandita Dogra, *Representations of Global Poverty: Aid, Development and International NGOs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) 2; McGloin and Georgeou, “Looks Good on Your CV,” 409.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Mostafanezhad and Dimitri Ioannides, *New Directions in Tourism Analysis: Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2016) 52.

<sup>33</sup> Sin, “Who are we responsible to?” 990.

<sup>34</sup> Sin, “Who are we responsible to?” 990.

### Low Impact and Dependency

Perhaps one of the easiest criticisms of the voluntourism industry is that it does not have as big of an impact in the world as it claims to. Part of the reason for the lack of impact is due to the lack of skills, knowledge, integrating, volunteering experience, and language skills, for example.<sup>35</sup> One way that this happens is that the industry tends to be geared more toward profit from western volunteers instead of focusing on the needs and desires of the host communities, therefore a lot of money is spent on recruitment and volunteer comfort, and not actually going back to the host communities.<sup>36</sup> When most volunteers stay for less than a month, a lot of time is spent on training and exploring the host community rather than working on the projects. The short-term nature of voluntourism makes it extremely difficult for projects to target structural problems, therefore many short-term projects fail to have a significant impact on the actual conditions of the host community.<sup>37</sup> Because many projects are short-term, there is also little to no incentive for participants to have developed the skills needed prior to serving abroad. One example explains how an American volunteer group in Tanzania was working on a construction project, but their work was taken down and redone every night by the Tanzanians, who knew that the group's work was unstable and unsound.<sup>38</sup> Although the field of medical voluntourism is quickly changing, volunteers were previously allowed to deliver babies and participate in surgeries that they were not qualified to do in their home countries, not only displacing health professionals in that location, but also putting everyone involved at risk.<sup>39</sup> Putting unskilled

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<sup>35</sup> Palacios, "Volunteer Tourism, Development and Education," 863, 868.

<sup>36</sup> Guttentag, "Negative Impacts," 541; Kirstie McAllum and Anne Zahra, "The positive impact of othering in voluntourism: The role of the relational other in becoming another self." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 10, no. 4 (2017): 294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2017.1280179>.

<sup>37</sup> Jakubiak, "Ambiguous Aims," 246; Banki and Schonell, "Contract Corrective," 1480-81.

<sup>38</sup> Rosenberg, "The Business of Voluntourism."

<sup>39</sup> Noelle Sullivan, "When Volunteering Abroad Does More Harm Than Good." *Huffington Post*, February 11, 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-sullivan-volunteering-abroad\\_us\\_5a7de894e4b044b3821d1627](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-sullivan-volunteering-abroad_us_5a7de894e4b044b3821d1627).

volunteers into these positions can actually undermine the years of work that NGOs have done to develop communities.<sup>40</sup> Not only can voluntourists harm any work that has already been done, but they can potentially create a sense of resentment toward themselves and other development workers, regardless of what they are doing, thereby putting the future of different organizations in the community at risk. Although many participants want to help in a positive way, motivations are not enough to make a difference when voluntourists are young, ignorant, and unskilled.<sup>41</sup> However, a counterargument to this narrative is that voluntourism, when done right, will hire individuals from the host community to house, feed, and transport participants, and that participants often volunteer in areas and projects where the local businesses and services cannot afford to pay workers.<sup>42</sup>

Many critics argue that voluntourism does not actually work toward development, but rather it creates systems of dependency.<sup>43</sup> These criticisms are very similar to those found about international development in general, as well as traditional tourism. Some of the same risks of dependency appear with traditional tourism, such as providing gifts and money to the children and individuals of host communities, which encourages begging, for example.<sup>44</sup> It is argued that voluntourism, as with development in general, undermines self-sufficiency by making host communities dependent on the ‘expert’ opinions from the West, and by forcing these same communities to be passive and grateful for any aid they receive, whether it is helpful or not.<sup>45</sup> Voluntourism as an industry requires inequality to even exist, so some critics point out that

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<sup>40</sup>Stephen Wearing and Nancy Gard McGehee, "Volunteer Tourism: A Review." *Tourism Management* 38 (October 2013): 125; Guttentag, "Negative Impacts," 543, 544.

<sup>41</sup>McAllum and Zahra, "The positive impact," 294.

<sup>42</sup>Ken Budd, "5 Myths about Voluntourism," *National Geographic*, November 98, 2018.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/intelligent-travel/2015/02/04/unpacking-voluntourism-five-myths/>.

<sup>43</sup>Sin, "Who are we responsible to?" 989.

<sup>44</sup>Sin, "Who are we responsible to?" 989.

<sup>45</sup> Guttentag, "Negative Impacts," 544; Sullivan, "More Harm."

companies may be aimed a self-preservation rather than aid because when they do achieve their goals, a destination would become irrelevant because it is too “developed”.<sup>46</sup>

One highly contested project area for voluntourism is orphanage work. Fortunately, this form of voluntourism is being pushed out through efforts from the Rethink Orphanages project and Australian government’s Smart Volunteering campaign. Orphanage volunteering is problematic not only because of the vulnerable populations involved, but it also encourages parents to send their children to orphanages, increasing the number of institutions in the developing world, while they are, at the same time, being phased out in the West. The reason for this is that there has been a rising demand of tourists who pay to work in them.<sup>47</sup> For example, “A 2006 survey by UNICEF in Liberia found that 98% of children living in orphanages were not orphans.”<sup>48</sup> As mentioned before, there are more and more campaigns trying to stop this form of tourism, and the number of programs available has decreased in recent years. Some countries, such as Australia, have even outlawed orphanage “trafficking”, equating it to modern slavery.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>McGloin and Georgeou, ““Looks Good on Your CV,” 414; Sin, “Who are we responsible to?” 991; Mostafanezhad and Ioannides, *New Directions*.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg, "The Business of Voluntourism."

<sup>48</sup> Rosenberg, "The Business of Voluntourism."

<sup>49</sup> Ross Duncan, "Australia Leads Way in Fight Against Orphanage Trafficking," *Epoch Times*, December 24, 2018. [https://www.theepochtimes.com/australia-leads-way-in-fight-against-orphanage-trafficking\\_2742545.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/australia-leads-way-in-fight-against-orphanage-trafficking_2742545.html).

### **Responsible Volunteering Model**

The voluntourism industry has the potential to have more positive effects than it is currently doing. Through my research I analyzed voluntourism company websites to see what is already being done. There are a handful of companies and organizations that clearly share their ethics and goals regarding their mission, but others have little to no information regarding their work abroad, so there are still improvements in the industry to be made. When the criticisms are considered, companies can not only maximize their impacts and deliver actual results to their participants and host partners, but they can also provide a better learning experience for both parties. Voluntourism has the potential to provide extra support to host organizations, increase intercultural and language competencies for participants and host communities, and provide personal and professional development.<sup>50</sup> When provided with the right type of training and support for both participants and hosts, “the power balance between tourist and hosts can be destabilised, cultural hegemony can be challenged, and tourist spaces constructed for genuine exchange which will benefit all the selves involved.”<sup>51</sup>

The best foot forward concerning the improvement of the voluntourism industry is to create some sort of standard for project implementation. However, creating a universal standard is a lengthy process and must take into account the volunteers, organizations, and host communities, bringing up the question, what perspective is acceptable for a standard to come from?<sup>52</sup> Because the industry is entangled in many ethical concerns, there is not necessarily one correct answer, and the awareness and beliefs surrounding the concerns are going to change with time, meaning that the standard has to be flexible when new research is published. There is also

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<sup>50</sup> Palacios, "Volunteer Tourism, Development and Education," 864, 872-873.

<sup>51</sup> Banki and Schonell, "Contract Corrective," 1478.

<sup>52</sup> Hartman, Paris, and Blache-Cohen, "Fair Trade Learning," 109.



debate on whether a standard would be effective or not, such as the debate surrounding the Eco-certification standard and its true effects on the industry.<sup>53</sup> As of currently, there is neither a universal form of accreditation or standard for voluntourism companies, nor a vetting system.<sup>54</sup> Previous attempts to create an accreditation have been short lasting and not worth it for companies to pursue, according to Heilwig Jones of Kaya Responsible Travel. Although there have been various campaigns to raise awareness about the problems surrounding the industry, it is still largely up to individual companies and potential participants to be responsible about their choices.

Based on my research, I have created a model for responsible volunteering that I have shared with the University of Wyoming and beyond. The criteria are a starting point for potential participants to look out for when choosing a program. They are also easily translatable for university study abroad offices when choosing to partner with programs, and for voluntourism companies to follow as a standard. These criteria were generated from the common criticisms surrounding the industry and are an attempt to ensure the best possible impact for host communities. It is important to note that these criteria should not just be applied to a company or a single project but should be taken into account when considering all levels of the industry. Although some companies do have their own ethical guidelines, this does not necessarily mean that every single project in every location follows that, and it is the duty of the organizations to continually monitor their programs and projects for changes that may affect its results. There are many other things that volunteers can do in addition to finding responsible programs, such as asking themselves what their true motives for volunteering are, as well as being responsible

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<sup>53</sup> Banki and Schonell, "Contract Corrective," 1478.

<sup>54</sup> Banki and Schonell, "Contract Corrective," 1478; Sullivan, "More Harm."

about social media use and their depictions of their work with other cultures, although those concerns are not necessarily covered in this paper.<sup>55</sup>

### Criteria for Responsible Volunteering



Figure 3. Criteria for Responsible Volunteering graphic. Created by Emily Wood, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Malaka Gharib, "Volunteering Abroad? Read This Before You Post That Selfie," *NPR*, November 26, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2014/07/31/336600290/as-volunteerism-explodes-in-popularity-whos-it-helping-most>.

## 1. Transparency

The first criterion is that organizations need to be transparent regarding costs and project goals. There are many reasons why participants should be paying for a volunteer experience abroad and the companies should be upfront about where your fees are going. Often, these fees are used to cover accommodation, food, site placements, and more, but websites should provide a cost breakdown, so the consumer know how much goes where, and what other costs they are expected to cover. Are the organizations clear and honest about where participant fees are going? Do they break down the costs? Is any of the money going back to the host organizations and communities? If it is, how? Have they hired locals to help with in-country support? Do they have a plan for the future? Figure 4 shows an example of the cost breakdown from a voluntourism provider website.

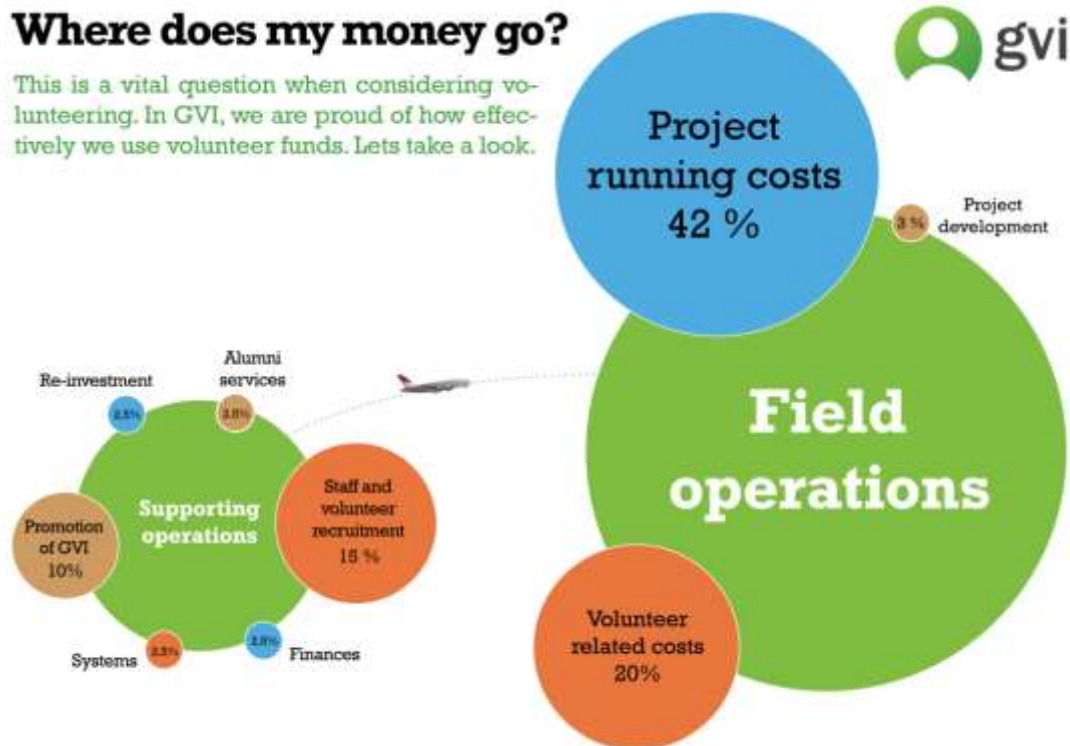


Figure 4. Example financial breakdown from GVI. <https://www.gvi.co.uk/how-is-my-money-spent/>

## **2. Training and Participant Support**

In order for volunteers to best serve in their positions, companies need to provide clear training and education about the project before it begins. This is not only important for the safety of participants, but also for keeping them engaged and respectful of host communities. This training should not only include job-specific knowledge but should also include information on cultural norms and practices, clear project expectations, cross-cultural communication, and ethics so volunteers have a better idea of what to expect and how to prepare. Other issues to discuss should include the participants' own cultural assumptions that they are bringing to the experience. Perhaps the most important aspect is to educate participants on how they are not there to make a difference in the world and save others, but they are simply volunteering their time towards a larger project.

## **3. Community-Initiated Projects**

To be effective and beneficial for host communities, voluntourism projects should be based in already-established local organizations that have an awareness of community needs and desires, and therefore companies should create partnerships with these local organizations and NGOs. It is important to determine how these organizations were chosen and how they support and promote local initiatives, rather than take away from local resources and creating a dependence. One example of this is asking whether voluntourism companies hire local site coordinators and staff to work as a mediator between the company and the local organization. Are the projects and methods sustainable? Voluntourism companies need to be able to show evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects, rather than relying on participant

satisfaction for positive reviews. What happens when projects are completed or are not achieving the goals they set out to do? Are they okay with leaving a location once they no longer need international volunteers, and if they do, how do they prepare the community for the future? Are the local organizations satisfied with their partnerships?

#### **4. Skills-Matching and Community Awareness**

In order to make the greatest contribution, volunteers should work on projects that best fit their skillset. Organizations should match participants not only to their interests, but also to their skills so that the projects can best benefit from the help. This can most often be done through a thorough application system, rather than a “sign-up and pay” system. It is also crucial for voluntourism organizations to make every effort to protect host communities and individuals whether that means completing background checks on participants working with vulnerable populations or getting proof of medical certifications for those interested in medical volunteering. Local populations need to be protected, and companies should not allow participants to perform tasks that they would not be qualified to do in their home country.

#### **5. Responsible Marketing**

Finally, responsible marketing goes hand in hand with responsible voluntourism. Volunteer abroad companies and organizations should be responsible in how they market their projects and goals to potential participants. This means that they should not be using and exploiting images of children and vulnerable populations and they should have permission from the subjects before displaying photographs and videos. They should also try not to depict communities and cultures as “the other,” and volunteers as saviors. Marketing and presentation also include language, meaning that

the language should be deliberate and precise, rather than general like “make a difference,” and “change the world.” Measures should be taken not to tell potential participants that they are saving others, but rather simply helping a larger project.



Figure 6. Example of a homepage image from Kaya Responsible Travel as of April 30, 2019. <https://www.kayavolunteer.com/>.



Figure 5. Example from IFRE Volunteers "About Us" page as of April 30, 2019. <https://www.ifrevolunteers.org/aboutus.php>

Figures 5 and 6 display some of the differences that can be seen between various providers. Both images are taken from program websites and both depict the typical Western volunteer, white females. The images found throughout both sites display a lack of diversity in volunteers, as most of them are likely from the Global North. The image depicted in Figure 5 is generally neutral with the two volunteers working on some sort of medical and health project, whereas Figure 6 depicts a volunteer surrounded by children, almost acting as the “white savior.” These assumptions are also seen through the wording of the accompanying text. In Figure 5, the program

claims to “offer the highest ethical standards,” putting the focus on ethics rather than the participant satisfaction. However, Figure 6 makes some larger claims. By saying “Help those most in need,” a value judgement is being laid down and puts the responsibility on the volunteer to save others, as if it were their responsibility. This program also attempts to draw in participants by claiming to be affordable, direct, and satisfactory to the volunteers, although there is no evidence of actual impact throughout the website. While Figure 5 presents a more responsible picture of their program and its impact, one must evaluate the rest of the site and programs to see where it falls regarding sustainable voluntourism. Figure 6, on the other hand, entices viewers with its moral and monetary draws, avoiding the true impacts on the host communities.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

The next question is, what happens next? After facilitating and increase the dialogue around voluntourism on campuses, what is the logical next step? As mentioned above, creating some sort of standard and accreditation would help to keep companies accountable for their actions, but how do we implement this and measure the true impacts of the industry? The World Tourism Organization, a UN agency, could be a good starting point to create change in the industry because they are focused on responsible and sustainable tourism.

This project also does not delve into the role that religious missions and short-term volunteer trips play. How are their ethics different, and should they be held to the same standard? Additionally, international internships may sometimes be little more than a different name for volunteering. Although volunteering is typically used to refer to low-skilled labor and projects,

whereas internships require some previous experience, some internships requirements may resemble volunteering requirements.<sup>56</sup> Finally, domestic volunteering and voluntourism is also a popular option that many universities offer as an “alternative break” trip during spring or winter breaks. The effects that these trips have on communities may be similar to those of international voluntourism. Do these standard need to be adapted to fit different contexts, or are they generally applicable to most situations?

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<sup>56</sup> Wilkinson, McCool, and Bois, "Analysis of the online marketing," 13.



## **Materials**

I have created the following materials to be used to raise awareness about voluntourism and its effects on the University of Wyoming campus and beyond. These materials can easily be adapted to other campuses and situations to contribute to the dialogue surrounding international volunteering. Although the University of Wyoming does not necessarily partner with many voluntourism organizations and companies, various organizations do market toward UW students through posters, info sessions, and student ambassadors. I have been working with the UW Education Abroad Office, the Honors College, and the Service, Leadership, Community, and Engagement (SLCE) Office on campus to distribute materials and ensure that the programs we partner with are ethical and responsible.

As part of my project, I have not only created handouts and articles for the Honors Newsletter and UW website, but I have also created a presentation for an info session sponsored by the UW Education Abroad Office.

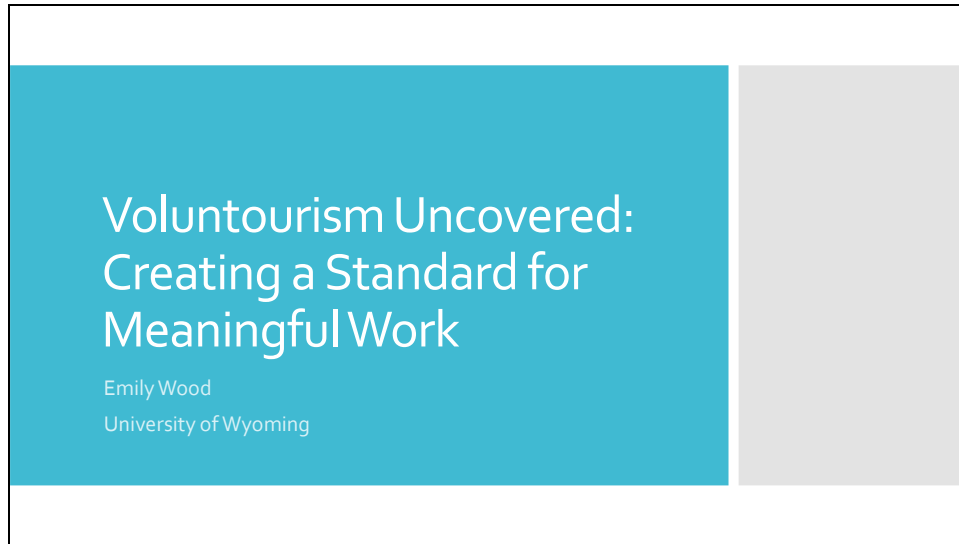
## **Voluntourism Uncovered: Creating a Standard for Meaningful Work**

I presented this project at the Western Regional Honors Council Conference at Montana State University, Bozeman on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and at the University of Wyoming Undergraduate Research Day on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Following is the abstract and presentation with notes.

### **ABSTRACT**

Many university students want to make a difference in the world by volunteering abroad. Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is a type of travel program in which participants have the chance to “give back to the community.” Programs are typically short term and can include work with orphanages, construction, or other fields in which participants often have little knowledge or few skills to offer. Critics have claimed that voluntourism may be more damaging than helpful. This study examines the voluntourism industry, its stated goals, and its effects on host communities. Methods utilized are content-analysis of program websites as well as interviews with personnel in host organizations, university study abroad offices, and potential and returning voluntourists. The goal of this analysis is to generate criteria for evaluating voluntourism programs. These criteria can be used by study abroad offices and implementing organizations to identify ethical and sustainable programs that work closely with host communities and participants and achieve the goals that they intend to. Hopefully this can create a standard for potential participants to identify which organizations are beneficial for host communities. Because opportunities for voluntourism are not going to disappear anytime soon, it is essential to raise awareness and promote programming that is meaningful to both host communities and voluntourists.

## Slide 1



Many university students want to make a difference in the world by volunteering abroad. Volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, is a type of travel program in which participants have the chance to “give back to the community.” However, research suggests that programs often do more harm than good. This study examines the voluntourism industry, its stated goals, and its effects on host communities in order to answer the question “What would meaningful voluntourism look like?” I will then introduce five criteria generated to recognize responsible programs.

## Slide 2

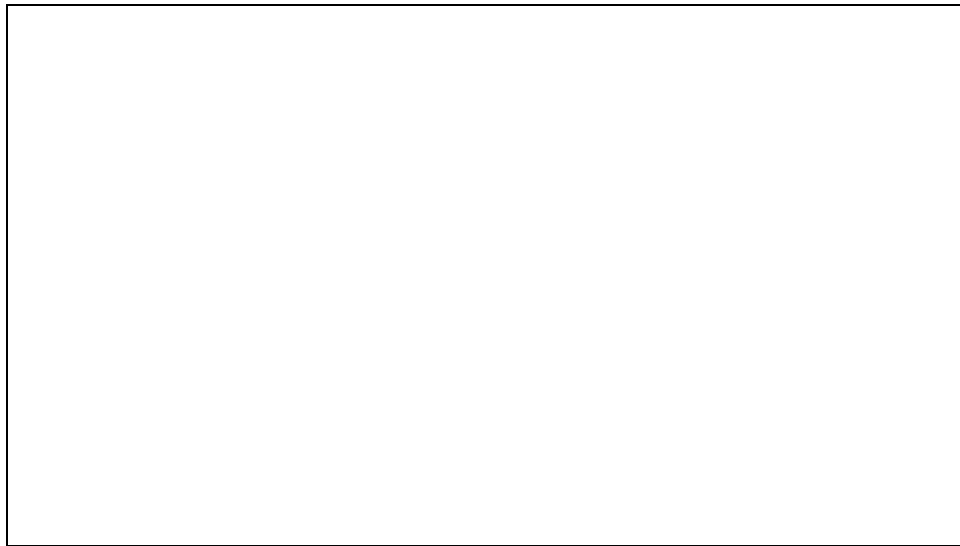


Volunteer tourism, otherwise known as voluntourism, is the act of traveling in an organized group to underdeveloped locations to volunteer for a short amount of time. Although researchers disagree on the length of time required for a volunteer trip to be considered voluntourism, it is

generally agreed upon that voluntourism trips can range anywhere between one week and three months. Voluntourism is often seen as and advertised an alternate way to spend one's vacation while giving back to the world. The industry's goals depend largely on who you are talking to. The field itself and the many companies involved market to individuals by claiming to offer the chance to "make a difference" or "travel with a purpose," and therefore participant goals are often associated with altruism, travel, and personal development. Although participants include many groups of people from high school students to retirees, most participants are university students and young adults. It is estimated that there are more than one million voluntourists going abroad from the US each year. Most volunteers, though not all, are coming from the global North.

Projects can be found all over the world, typically in "underdeveloped" locations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where about 92% of projects are located. Some argue that, because participants are coming from the global North to view the global South, these locations essentially become "zoos" for viewing "The Other." Potential volunteers have the option of choosing among many different projects. The list includes working in orphanages and with childcare, teaching English, construction and manual labor, and environment and conservation, although there are many other possibilities.

### Slide 3



Because of my own studies abroad and stories from friends who have participated in voluntourism programs, I became interested in finding ways to volunteer my time to helping others. However, after looking into some programs, I realized that voluntourism is not all that it seems to be, and I wanted to make my impact by improving the industry.

The goal of my research is to generate criteria for evaluating voluntourism programs. These criteria can be used by study abroad offices and implementing organizations to identify ethical and sustainable programs that work closely with host communities and participants and achieve the goals that they intend to. Hopefully this can create a standard for potential participants to identify which organizations are beneficial for host communities.

My methodology included a literature review of voluntourism and its effects, as well as articles written by past volunteer tourists. I also used content-analysis of voluntourism program websites and interviews with personnel in the industry. The content-analysis of programs was based on a series of critiques regarding voluntourism.

Although voluntourism research has only been around for about fifteen years, there is a general consensus that the industry may do more harm than good in many cases. The largest problem with this is the fact that individuals are not going to stop volunteering abroad, and therefore it is important to improve the industry rather than eliminate it entirely.

Although there are many different criticisms regarding voluntourism, I am only going to list some of the most prevalent, as these are the criticisms I tried to address when creating criteria for ethical and responsible programs. Many critics refer to volunteer tourists as privileged individuals who believe that they can save the world, and this mindset contributes to the “us vs. them” mentality, separating host communities from the volunteers. Another set of common criticisms is that voluntourism projects are not community initiated, create dependency, take away jobs from locals, and put unskilled workers in jobs that they cannot do well. Some argue that voluntourism is more focused on making profit, rather than being altruistic and helping others, and as a result, their projects and locations reflect this desire to pretense of doing good.

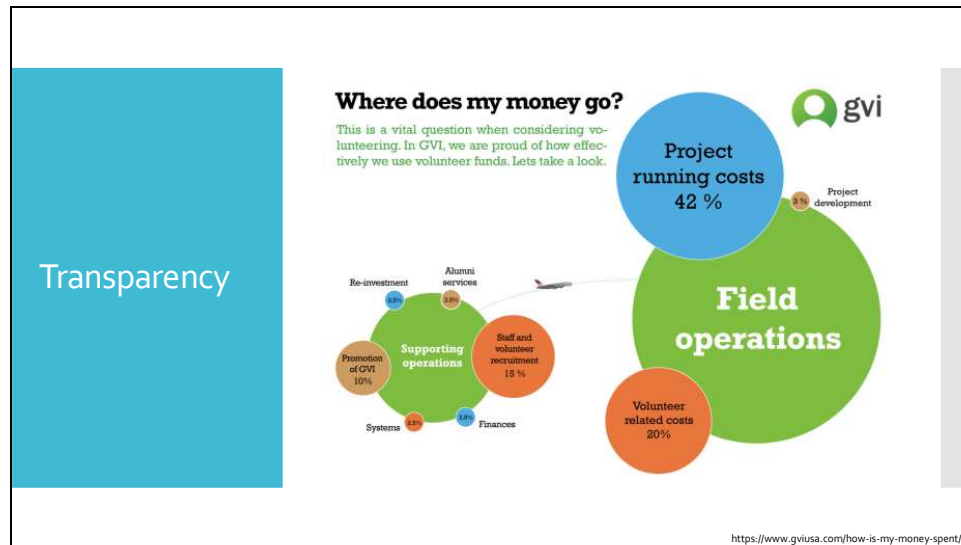
#### Slide 4



Based on the information I gathered, there does seem to be a shift in the voluntourism industry toward sustainable and ethical volunteering. Some of the larger companies, such as GVI and Kaya, have already clearly established their ethical concerns and are very transparent about where the program fees are going. However, there are still many companies that have very little information on their websites regarding anything that they are doing.

My research led me to consider five main criteria for evaluating voluntourism organizations and projects: Transparency, training and participant support, community-initiated projects, skills-matching and community awareness, and responsible marketing.

## Slide 5



The first criterion is that organizations need to be transparent regarding costs and project goals. Are the organizations clear and honest about where participant fees are going? Do they break down the costs? Is any of the money going back to the host organizations and communities? Regarding project goals, are these achievable and long-term? Do they have a plan for the future?

## Slide 6



Companies need to provide training and participant support. This is not only important for the safety of participants, but also for keeping them engaged and respectful of host communities. Volunteer programs should have some sort of training prior to the beginning of the project. This training should not only include job-specific knowledge but should also include information on cultural norms and practices, project expectations, cross-cultural communication, and ethics.

Other issues to discuss should include the participants' own cultural assumptions that they are bringing to the experience. Another important lesson is to educate participants on how they are not there to make a difference in the world and save others, but they are simply volunteering their time towards a larger project.

## Slide 7

# Community-Initiated Projects



<https://www.kayavolunteer.com/responsible-travel>

To be effective and beneficial for host communities, voluntourism projects should be based in local organizations, and therefore companies should create partnerships with these local organizations and NGOs. It is important to determine how these organizations were chosen and how they support and promote local initiatives, rather than take away from local resources and creating a dependence. One example of this is asking whether voluntourism companies hire local site coordinators and staff to work as a mediator between the company and the local organization. Another important question to ask voluntourism companies is what happens when projects are completed or are not achieving the goals they set out to do? Are they okay with leaving a location once they no longer need international volunteers? Are the local organizations satisfied with their partnerships? Voluntourism companies need to be able to show evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects, rather than relying on participant satisfaction for positive reviews.

## Slide 8

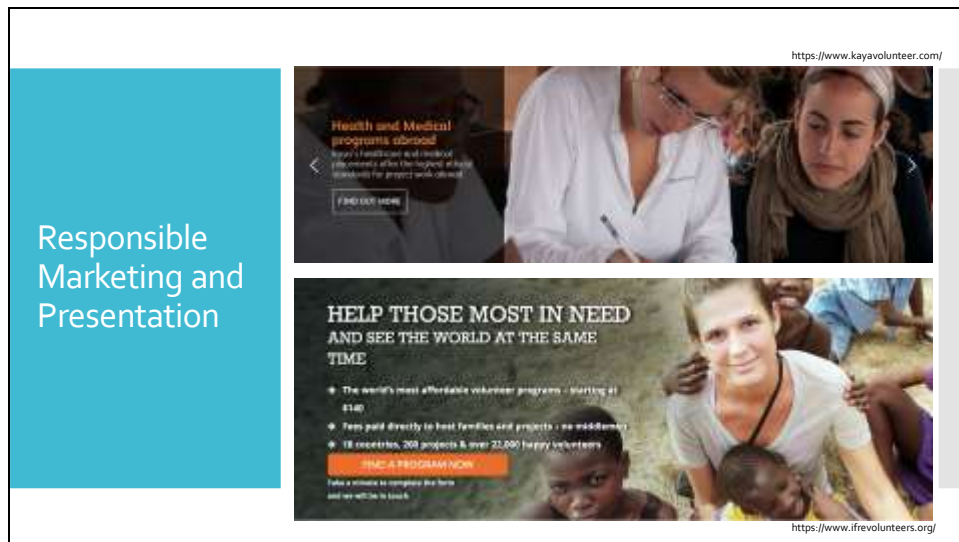


**Skills Matching and Community Awareness**

- Professional skills
- Qualifications
- Certifications
- Background checks

Organizations should match participants not only to their interests, but also to their skills so that the projects can best benefit from the help. In addition, every effort should be made to protect local communities and individuals, whether that means completing background checks on participants, or getting proof of medical certifications. Local populations need to be protected, and organizations should not allow participants to perform tasks that they would not be qualified to do in their home country.

## Slide 9



**Responsible Marketing and Presentation**

<https://www.kayavolunteer.com/>

**Health and Medical programs abroad**  
 Travel, healthcare and medical placements after background check available for project work abroad

**FIND OUT NOW**

**HELP THOSE MOST IN NEED AND SEE THE WORLD AT THE SAME TIME**

- The world's most affordable volunteer program - starting at £140
- Fees paid directly to host families and projects - no middlemen
- 18 countries, 200 projects & over 23,000 happy volunteers

**JOIN A PROGRAM NOW**

Take a minute to complete the form and we will be in touch.

<https://www.ifrevolunteers.org/>

Finally, responsible marketing goes hand in hand with responsible voluntourism. Volunteer abroad companies and organizations should be responsible in how they market their projects and goals to potential participants. This means that they should not be using and exploiting images of children and vulnerable populations and they should have permission from the subjects before



displaying photographs and videos. They should also try not to depict other communities and cultures as “the other.” Marketing and presentation also include language, meaning that the language should be deliberate and precise, rather than general like “Make a difference,” and “change the world.” Measures should be taken not to tell potential participants that they are saving others, but rather simply helping out.

### Slide 10



It is important to note that these criteria should not just be applied to a company or a single project but should be taken into account when considering all levels of the industry. Although some companies do have their own ethical guidelines, this does not necessarily mean that every single project in every location follows that, and it is the duty of the organizations to continually monitor their programs and projects for changes that may affect its results.

In recent years there has been backlash against volunteer tourism and those who participate in it. Although some organizations and companies have realized their impact and the possible negative outcomes of sending volunteers abroad, there is still a long way to go until the industry becomes more sustainable and beneficial to local host communities. One way to change this is to educate potential participants on their impact and give them an easy way to figure out the impact of an organization or project. Although this information can be shared easily, it still only has a limited impact on the industry. Voluntourism companies and organizations need to be held accountable for the impact that they have, and hopefully by laying some groundwork and creating a list of criteria for responsible volunteering, some sort of a standard can be implemented, allowing the industry to move forward sustainably and responsibly. These criteria can be utilized by individuals, voluntourism companies, and study abroad offices to help inform potential participants and continue to create conversation around the true effects of volunteering abroad.

## **International Volunteering: Where to Start**

### **Emily Wood**

As the summer approaches and you are trying to figure out what to do over break, a common opportunity that students consider is volunteering abroad. “What better way to see the world and give back at the same time?” you might be thinking. Although the thought of volunteering abroad may seem appealing, make sure you are an informed traveler and know that you can make a meaningful contribution. Before selecting a program, there are some important things to know about the international volunteering industry and its actual impacts.

Recent studies show that voluntourism does not always help host communities as much as it claims to do and can sometimes have negative effects. Some providers are aware of the criticisms and are working on mitigating them through their program designs and ethics, but other providers have not begun to make this switch. It is therefore up to you to make conscious and responsible choices. Below is a list of important criteria to look for in a program to help volunteers identify which programs are having positive impacts on not only the volunteers, but also the communities they have set out to work with.

#### **1. Expect Transparency**

There are many reasons why you should be paying for a volunteer experience and organizations should be upfront about where your fees are going. Often, these fees are used to cover accommodation, food, site placements, and more, but websites should provide a cost breakdown, so you know how much goes where.

#### **2. Look for Training and Participant Support**

In order to best serve in your position, you need to have had clear training and education about the project before you begin. This training should not only include job-specific knowledge but should also include information on cultural norms and practices, project expectations, cross-cultural communication, and ethics so you have a better idea of what to expect. They should also be honest about your impact and expectations because one week of volunteering will not necessarily change the world.

### **3. Look for Community-initiated Projects**

Research the projects offered by an organization and their partners. Voluntourism organizations should be partnered with local organizations found in the host country because those organizations are most aware of what communities need the most and how to help them. It is important for the projects to be community-initiated because then there is a bigger chance that volunteers are being helpful. Another question to ask organizations is whether they hire in-country staff and contribute to their economies, rather than bringing in outside resources. Are the projects and methods sustainable, and what happens when volunteers are no longer needed at a site? Are the local organizations satisfied with their partnerships? Voluntourism companies should be able to show evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects, rather than relying on participant satisfaction for positive reviews.

### **4. Skills-Matching and Community Awareness**

In order to make the greatest contribution, volunteers should work on projects that best fit their skillset. Organizations should also help in matching the skills to the

particular projects. It is also crucial for voluntourism organizations to make every effort to protect host communities and individuals, which means that for certain projects volunteers should have completed background checks or only be allowed to complete medical tasks that they are certified to do.

### **5. Pay Attention to Responsible Marketing**

Responsible marketing goes hand in hand with responsible voluntourism, so make sure you are paying attention to what organizations are putting out there. Volunteer abroad companies should be responsible in how they market their projects and goals to potential participants. This means that they should not be using and exploiting images of children and vulnerable populations and they should have permission from the subjects before publishing material. They should also try not to depict other communities and cultures as “the other.” Marketing and presentation also include language, meaning that the language should be deliberate and precise, rather than general like “Make a difference,” and “change the world.” Measures should be taken not to tell volunteers that they are saving others, but rather simply helping out.

These criteria do not address all the criticisms of the voluntourism industry, nor do they claim to “fix” all the problems. They are only meant to bring awareness to the volunteer, so they can choose sustainable, responsible, and ethical programs that will contribute positively to host communities. Most responsible international volunteer organizations will have a lot of this information already listed on their website. If not, they should be open to discussing any and all of your questions, so you can be sure that you are making a good choice.

For more information about voluntourism, feel free to check out any of the following materials:

Cole, Teju. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *The Atlantic*. March 21, 2012.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

Guttentag, Daniel A. "The Possible Negative Impacts of Volunteer Tourism."

*International Journal of Tourism Research* 11, no. 6 (2009): 537-551.

Hartman, Eric, Cody Morris Paris, and Brandon Blache-Cohen. "Fair Trade Learning:

Ethical Standards for Community-Engaged International Volunteer Tourism."

*Tourism and Hospitality Research* 14, no. 1-2 (January 2014): 108-16.

Jesionka, Natalie. "The Reality of Voluntourism and the Conversations We're Not

Having." *The Muse*. <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-reality-of-voluntourism-and-the-conversations-were-not-having>.

Kahn, Carrie. "As 'Voluntourism' Explodes in Popularity, Who's it Helping the Most.?"

*NPR*. July 31, 2014.

<http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2014/07/31/336600290/as-volunteerism-explodes-in-popularity-whos-it-helping-most>.

Kushner, Jacob. "The Voluntourist's Dilemma." *New York Times Magazine*. March 22,

2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/magazine/the-voluntourists-dilemma.html>.

Wearing, Stephen, and Nancy Gard McGehee. "Volunteer Tourism: A Review." *Tourism*

*Management* 38 (October 2013): 120-130.

## **Honors Newsletter: Voluntourism**

### **Emily Wood**

As university students, we are often encouraged to volunteer our time helping others. Although there are many options to do so, a more appealing way to do this is to volunteer abroad during a school break. This is often referred to as volunteer tourism, or voluntourism, and it brings with it a plethora of ethical concerns that you may not be aware of. If you decide to undertake service-learning trips abroad, it is important to make sure that you are an informed traveler and know that you can make a meaningful contribution.

Recent studies show that voluntourism can sometimes have negative effects. Some providers are aware of the criticisms and are working on mitigating them through their program designs and ethics, but other providers have not begun to make this switch. It is therefore up to you to make conscious and responsible choices. Make sure to thoroughly research your options and try to find a program that you are interested in, and follows these main criteria:

- 1. Transparency concerning program fees**
- 2. Training and participant support**
- 3. Community-initiated projects**
- 4. Matches your skills to projects and protects the host community**
- 5. Responsible marketing**

Most responsible volunteering programs already have a lot of this information on their websites, and if not, they should be open to answering your questions. For more detailed information about these criteria and the effects of voluntourism in general, please visit the UWYO Education Abroad website.

Graphics



# Criteria for Responsible Voluntourism





## Materials for Study Abroad Offices

## Slide 1



Start here and go... **ANYWHERE.**

## Volunteering Abroad and Voluntourism

## Slide 2

### What is voluntourism?

- Volunteer + tourism
- Service projects in underdeveloped locations
- Typically last between one week and three months

- Common projects:
  - Construction
  - Community welfare
  - Child Care
  - Education
  - Health Care
  - Environmental Work



**UWYO ABROAD**  
Start here and go... **ANYWHERE.**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
Education Beyond Borders

Voluntourism is the act of travelling to underdeveloped locations with an organized group to perform service work in that location. Trips and projects typically last anywhere between a week and three months, making it an attractive option for many people to explore the world and help others while they are on a school break, for example. Most participants are college students and young adults, although retirees and those looking for a career break are also volunteering, with most of these participants originated from western regions such as the United States, Canada, and Europe. This trend has only recently become popular and has been an increasingly lucrative business in the past few years, and there is estimated to be more than one million voluntourists going abroad from the United States each year. Also known by other terms such as “volunteer

vacation,” “mini-mission,” “pro-poor tourism,” “vacation volunteering,” “altruistic tourism,” and “service-based vacation,” more and more Western volunteers are embarking on these types of trips.

### Slide 3

## Why volunteer abroad?

- See the world
- Experience a new perspective
- Try new things
- Challenge yourself
- Learn from other leaders in my field
- Build professional network
- Make new friends
- Gain cross-cultural skills
- Exposure to diversity
- Build your resume




### Slide 4

## Considerations before committing

Criticisms

- Privilege and the White Savior Industrial Complex
- Contributes to “Us vs. Them”
- Companies benefit more than host communities
- Low impact due to lack of skills and short-term
- Creates dependency
- Takes jobs away from locals



Usually only privileged individuals from “developed” countries have enough time and money to spend on voluntourism projects.

White Savior Industrial Complex: is the idea that “a nobody from American or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied.”

## Slide 5

## How to find a sustainable program

- What are your motivations for volunteering abroad?
- Where are you interested in going and why?
- What are your skills? What skills do you want to develop?
- What kinds of projects are you interested in?
- How much time can you dedicate?

**Do your research!**

**Criteria for Responsible Volunteering**



The infographic consists of five colored boxes arranged in a grid. The top row has 'Transparency' (purple) with a pie chart icon and 'Training and Participant Support' (green) with a person at a whiteboard icon. The middle row has 'Community-Initiated Projects' (blue) with people icons and 'Photo-Matching and Community Awareness' (yellow) with a magnifying glass icon. The bottom row has 'Responsible Marketing' (red) with a megaphone icon. The text 'Criteria for Responsible Volunteering' is written vertically on the left side.



The bottom of the slide features a yellow 'UWYO ABROAD' logo on the left and a horizontal collage of seven photos showing people in various outdoor and travel-related settings.

## Slide 6

## Transparency

- Are companies clear and honest about where participant fees are going?
- Are costs broken down?
- Is any of the money going back to the host organizations and communities? If it is, how?
- Have they hired locals to help with in-country support?
- Do they have a plan for the future?

**Where does my money go?**



The pie chart is titled 'Where does my money go?' and is divided into three main sections. The largest section is 'Project running costs' at 42%, shown in a blue circle. The second largest is 'Field operations', shown in a large green circle. The smallest is 'Volunteer related costs' at 20%, shown in an orange circle. There are also smaller circles for 'Supporting operations' (12%), 'Local salaries' (12%), and 'Project development' (12%).



The bottom of the slide features a yellow 'UWYO ABROAD' logo on the left and a horizontal collage of seven photos showing people in various outdoor and travel-related settings.

*Example financial breakdown from GVI. <https://www.gvi.co.uk/how-is-my-money-spent/>*

The first criterion is that organizations need to be transparent regarding costs and project goals. There are many reasons why participants should be paying for a volunteer experience abroad and the companies should be upfront about where your fees are going. Often, these fees are used to cover accommodation, food, site placements, and more, but websites should provide a cost breakdown, so the consumer know how much goes where, and what other costs they are expected to cover. Are the organizations clear and honest about where participant fees are going? Do they break down the costs? Is any of the money going back to the host organizations and communities? If it is, how? Have they hired locals to help with in-country support? Do they have a plan for the future? This chart shows an example of the cost breakdown from a voluntourism provider website.

## Slide 7

## Training and Participant Support

- Clear project expectations
- Job-specific training
- Cultural norms/practices
- Cross-cultural communication
- Ethics
- Your work is part of a larger project



For volunteers to best serve in their positions, companies need to provide clear training and education about the project before it begins. This is not only important for the safety of participants, but also for keeping them engaged and respectful of host communities. This training should not only include job-specific knowledge but should also include information on cultural norms and practices, clear project expectations, cross-cultural communication, and ethics so volunteers have a better idea of what to expect and how to prepare. Other issues to discuss should include the participants' own cultural assumptions that they are bringing to the experience. Perhaps the most important aspect is to educate participants on how they are not there to make a difference in the world and save others, but they are simply volunteering their time towards a larger project.

## Slide 8

## Community-Initiated Projects

- Partnerships with local organizations
  - Awareness of community needs/desires
- Local staff?
- Are the projects sustainable?
- Is there evidence of success?
- What happens when the projects are completed?
- Are the organizations happy with the partnerships?




To be effective and beneficial for host communities, voluntourism projects should be based in already-established local organizations that have an awareness of community needs and desires, and therefore companies should create partnerships with these local organizations and NGOs. It is important to determine how these organizations were chosen and how they support and promote local initiatives, rather than take away from local resources and creating a dependence. One example of this is asking whether voluntourism companies hire local site coordinators and staff to work as a mediator between the company and the local organization. Are the projects and methods sustainable? Voluntourism companies need to be able to show evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects, rather than relying on participant satisfaction for positive reviews. What happens when projects are completed or are not achieving the goals they set out to do? Are they okay with leaving a location once they no longer need international volunteers, and if they do, how do they prepare the community for the future? Are the local organizations satisfied with their partnerships?

## Slide 9

## Skills-Matching and Community Awareness

- Application system to match skills with projects
- Protect host communities
  - Background checks for work with vulnerable populations
  - Proof of medical certifications




To make the greatest contribution, volunteers should work on projects that best fit their skillset. Organizations should match participants not only to their interests, but also to their skills so that the projects can best benefit from the help. This can most often be done through a thorough application system, rather than a “sign-up and pay” system. It is also crucial for voluntourism organizations to make every effort to protect host communities and individuals whether that means completing background checks on participants working with vulnerable populations or getting proof of medical certifications for those interested in medical volunteering. Local populations need to be protected, and companies should not allow participants to perform tasks that they would not be qualified to do in their home country.

## Slide 10

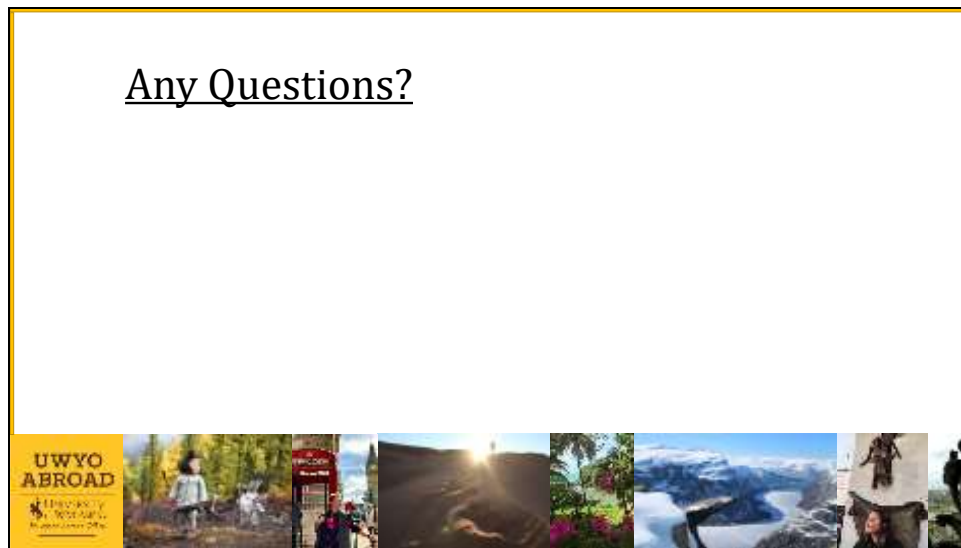
## Responsible Marketing

- No exploitation of vulnerable populations
- Volunteers are not “saviors”
- Host communities are not “the other”
- Language should not be general like “save the world”



Finally, responsible marketing goes hand in hand with responsible voluntourism. Volunteer abroad companies and organizations should be responsible in how they market their projects and goals to potential participants. This means that they should not be using and exploiting images of children and vulnerable populations and they should have permission from the subjects before displaying photographs and videos. They should also try not to depict other communities and cultures as “the other,” and volunteers as saviors. Marketing and presentation also include language, meaning that the language should be deliberate and precise, rather than general like “make a difference,” and “change the world.” Measures should be taken not to tell potential participants that they are saving others, but rather simply helping a larger project.

### Slide 11



Be an aware traveler and know the potential impacts of your work abroad before you go. It is better to volunteer abroad for long-term projects, but if you can't make that work, make sure you'll be contributing to a project that is in the works. And don't forget to have fun and learn about the issues you are working on and the culture you are living with.

The following page has the front and back of a UWYO Abroad handout.

# RESPONSIBLE VOLUNTEERING ABROAD

## TRANSPARENCY

There are many reasons why you should be paying for a volunteer experience and organizations should be upfront about where your fees are going. Often, these fees are used to cover accommodation, food, site placements, and more, but websites should provide a cost breakdown, so you know how much goes where.



## TRAINING AND PARTICIPANT SUPPORT

Pre-departure training should include job-specific knowledge, information on cultural norms and practices, project expectations, cross-cultural communication, and ethics so you have a better idea of what to expect. The program should also be honest about your impact and expectations because one week of volunteering will not necessarily change the world.



## COMMUNITY-INITIATED PROJECTS

Voluntourism organizations should be partnered with local organizations found in the host country. Do they hire local staff? Are the local organizations satisfied with their partnerships? Voluntourism companies should be able to show evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of their projects, rather than relying on participant satisfaction for positive reviews.



## SKILLS-MATCHING

Organizations should also help in matching your skills to the particular projects. It is also crucial for voluntourism organizations to make every effort to protect host communities and individuals, which means that for certain projects volunteers should have completed background checks or only be allowed to complete medical tasks that they are certified to do.



## RESPONSIBLE MARKETING

Make sure you are paying attention to what organizations are putting out there. Programs should not be using and exploiting images of children and vulnerable populations. They should not depict other communities and cultures as "the other." Language should be deliberate and precise, rather than general like "make a difference," and "change the world."



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# INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING ABROAD?

## There are lots of programs to do so.

Although the thought of volunteering abroad may seem appealing, make sure you are an informed traveler and know that know you can make a meaningful contribution. Before selecting a program, there are some important things to know about the international volunteering industry and its actual impacts.

Recent studies show that voluntourism does not always help host communities as much as it claims to do and can sometimes have negative effects. Some providers are aware of the criticisms and are working on mitigating them through their program designs and ethics, but other providers have not begun to make this switch. It is therefore up to you to make conscious and responsible choices.

**For more information about the impacts of voluntourism and what you can do, visit our website at**

**<http://www.uwyo.edu/uwyoabroad/>**

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