



Not That Alternative: Short-term Volunteer Tourism at an Organic Farming Project in Costa Rica

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Abstract

Drawing on interview-based research with seven young Canadian women who volunteered briefly at an organic farming project in Costa Rica, supplemented by participant observation with a larger group of volunteers and conversations with local people and the farm's owners, this paper offers an empirically grounded critique of short-term international volunteering. It demonstrates that, despite the claims of the voluntourism industry and the hopeful rhetoric of much academic literature, international volunteering does not reliably yield discernable material contributions to social development or environmental sustainability in 'host communities', meaningful trans-cultural understanding between locals and volunteers, or, in the short-term at least, transformative reflexive self-development among volunteers. Nor in the case under examination did it "challenge the very foundations of contemporary tourism and capitalist globalisation" (Higgins-



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Desboilles and Russell-Mundine, 2008, 186). Rather, “volunteerism” was almost entirely subordinated to “tourism” as a framework for imagining, understanding, coordinating, and performing Northern selves in the context of participants’ trips to Costa Rica. The paper traces five main dimensions of this ‘transformative failure’: (a) the hierarchical binary between Northern subject and Southern object on which discourses of international volunteering depend, (b) short-term volunteering’s reliance on a tourism infrastructure, (c) the farm’s specific characteristics as a volunteering project, (d) the short duration of participants’ volunteering stint, and (e) the behavioural outcomes of volunteers’ consequent disillusionment with their experience over the course of the trip.

Volunteering as (Alternative) Tourism

Volunteer tourism – sometimes called voluntourism – is a form of alternative tourism, usually international, that combines holiday travel with volunteering activities (Raymond and Hall, 2008, 530; Wearing, 2001). It is often categorised as one of several overlapping forms of postmodern tourism that offer travelers *alternatives* to conventional mass tourism (Scheyvens, 2002; Uriely *et al.*, 2003).² Much tourism literature describes international volunteer tourism as having “transformative potential” (Lyons and Wearing, 2008b, 4) to (a) inspire reflexive self-development of tourists, (b) enable progressive trans-cultural understanding between tourists and host communities, and (c) contribute to social development or environmental sustainability in locations where tourists volunteer (Brown and Morrison, 2003; Chapman, 1982; Clark, 1978; Lyons and Wearing, 2008b; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Mustonen, 2005; Singh and Singh, 2001, 2004; Wearing 2001, 2002).

Scholars perceive in international volunteering the potential for a transformed tourism where profit motives are secondary to social and environmental benefit, relations of privilege between guests and hosts are dismantled, meaningful intersubjective interactions occur between travelers and locals, and travelers become more reflexive. This position is developed most thoroughly in a series of publications by Stephen Wearing and his colleagues (Lyons and Wearing, 2008a; Wearing, 2001, 2002; Wearing and Neil, 2000). Wearing’s research at a volunteer-based ecotourism rainforest reserve in Costa Rica convinces him that volunteering offers a route out of tourism as “just commodified leisure” (Wearing, 2001, 14). In contrast with conventional or ‘mass’ tourism, which is criticised for having a poor environmental, social, and economic record, volunteer tourism is routinely portrayed as a well-balanced hybrid in which the goals of volunteering can be achieved in trans-cultural encounters that are organised touristically, while tourism

² As early as 1999 volunteer and charity tourism were described as among “the fastest growing sectors of the holiday market,” (Marriott, 1999, in Callahan and Thomas, 2005, 185). In February 2009 Volunteer Abroad, a popular internet database of organised volunteering opportunities, listed 4,238 organised volunteer projects in 160 countries worldwide (Volunteer Abroad), compared to 1,222 itemised project activities in 156 countries five years earlier (Callahan and Thomas, 2005, 187).

itself is ennobled and transformed by its attachment to volunteering (Lyons and Wearing, 2008a).

Recent studies have begun to question this sanguine assessment of voluntourism's transformative potential (Butcher, 2003; Callahan and Thomas, 2005; Coghlan, 2008; Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Gray and Campbell, 2007; Guttentag, 2009; Mowforth and Munt, 1998; Raymond, 2008; Raymond and Hall, 2008; Simpson 2004, 2005). In a review of this critical work, Daniel Guttentag (2009, 537; also McGehee and Andereck, 2008) identifies five possible inhibiting effects, including "a neglect of locals' desires, a hindering of work progress and completion of unsatisfactory work, a disruption of local economies, a reinforcement of conceptualisations of the 'other' and rationalisations of poverty, and an instigation of [unwelcome] cultural changes". Like many of the authors he cites, Guttentag (2009) presents these as outcomes that can be avoided at the project level through careful planning, effective organisation, and adequate training. Other authors (e.g., Simpson, 2004, 2005) offer a more systemic critique, arguing that negative outcomes result from the material organisation and discursive constitution of the volunteer tourism sector as a whole, and not simply from the inadequacies of individual projects or organisations.

The present article lends support to this emerging body of critical literature through an empirical examination of a volunteer-oriented organic farming project in Costa Rica. Kate conducted the empirical research and much of the analysis described here for her MA thesis in Social Justice and Equity Studies at Brock University (Zavitz, 2004). David was Kate's thesis supervisor; he subsequently helped her rework parts of the thesis for publication as this article. Kate first encountered the project in August 2002, when she volunteered there for a month. After she returned to Canada to commence graduate studies the travel company that organised her excursion asked her to be a group facilitator for future trips to the farm. Seeing this as an opportunity to better understand how international volunteerism is constituted in this context Kate accepted the job and returned eight and twelve months later with groups of mainly female Canadian volunteers all of whom agreed at the outset to consider being interviewed about their experiences after the formal (guide/volunteer) relationship dissolved at the end of the trip. These volunteers paid about \$2,500 (including airfare) for two weeks in Costa Rica. Many extended their trip to spend more time volunteering or traveling independently. Kate eventually conducted in-depth interviews of roughly two hours duration with seven Canadian volunteers. These post-trip interviews supplemented many hours of conversation with volunteers during the trip, as well as careful observation of their behaviours. She also interviewed five locals who were involved with the farm, and its two owners, who shared their own prolonged experiences with international volunteers, as well as their assessment of the challenges of running a volunteer-oriented project. Our analysis draws from these sources of insight, as well as from Kate's own experiences, initially as an eager

volunteer, and later as a group facilitator whose responsibility was to help volunteers realize their complicated expectations at the farm.³

When Kate's participants were asked how they understand volunteering abroad and why they decided to spend some time doing it, their answers resembled those reported by other researchers who've asked similar questions of other groups of international volunteers; they emphasised the importance of actively "giving something of themselves, not expecting anything in return; just giving it because they can, because they're able to, because they think that it plays into some bigger good... and because you get, you feel affirmed from volunteering" (Julia; cf. Broad, 2003; Gray and Campbell, 2007; Lyons and Wearing, 2008a; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Simpson, 2004; Singh and Singh, 2004; Wearing, 2001). It is in these sorts of sentiments that some scholars imagine the potential for a transformed tourism. Our analysis leads in a different direction. We think the characterisations of voluntourism participants expressed are fanciful and unmoored from the contingencies of place and possibility, and we wonder if researchers have too willingly inferred practice and outcome from similar sentiments expressed by other voluntourists. Among our participants, these sentiments did not translate into a travel experience that was alternative in the transformative ways imagined either by themselves or in the literature we've been referencing.

Our *first* objective is to explain why not. We think there are five important dimensions to an explanation, relating to (a) the ease with which discourses of international volunteering are assimilated into tourism discourses and practices, (b) short-term international volunteering's embeddedness in a tourism infrastructure that shapes trans-cultural interactions as touristic exchange relationships, (c) the project's specific characteristics as a micro-context for international volunteering, (d) the short time participants in the study spent volunteering at the farm, and (e) disillusionment among volunteers regarding their prospects of achieving the high ideals of international volunteering, which led them over the course of the trip to give up on seeking opportunities for trans-cultural intersubjectivity and settle instead for enjoying themselves in other ways. The first four of these dimensions are addressed to varying degrees in the critical literature we cite above, although seldom in relation to each other. This article's contribution is to show how they work *together* to undermine the supposed transformational potential of volunteer tourism in this micro-context and lead to the fifth dimension – volunteer disillusionment – which we don't think has been considered in previous literature. After detailing these five dimensions we then address our *second* main objective, which is to summarise the *effects* of volunteering at the site in question in terms of the three areas of transformative potential that much volunteer tourism literature

³ Kate received formal permission to conduct the research from the farm's owners and the agency that employed her as group facilitator before each of her research trips. Volunteers were also informed of the research before they committed to travel to Costa Rica in a group led by Kate, indicating their consent to be the objects of participant observation. All interview participants, including volunteers, the farm's owners and Costa Rican employees provided signed voluntary informed consent.

identifies: material contributions to social development or environmental sustainability in the host community, the growth of trans-cultural understanding between locals and volunteers, and volunteers' own reflexive self-development. We argue that positive effects are clearly negligible in the first two of these areas, and less straightforwardly so in the third.

Belief in these three areas of transformative potential is expressed in the preponderance of volunteer tourism literature, as well as by voluntourism promotional material, and the participants in this and other studies. We therefore treat them as descriptive of a widely-accepted 'ideal volunteer tourism' that is defined in contrast to conventional and other alternative tourism (cf. Coghlan and Gooch, 2011). Our strategy throughout is to assess voluntourism at the site in question in relation to this set of ideal outcomes and the practices that are understood to achieve them. In detailing the dimensions that undermine these ideals' achievement at the project we examine, we hope also to show that the ideals themselves are unrealistic for reasons that have as much to do with international volunteering's positioning in a global tourism sector as with the micro-scale shortcomings of a particular project or the ambivalent commitment of a specific group of individuals to the ideals that inspired them to volunteer. We think the failure of the project we examine to provide a transformative experience to the small group of voluntourists we studied is shaped substantially by the discursive and material constitution of the short-term volunteering sector, which may reasonably be expected to have similarly constraining effects on other volunteers and other short-term volunteering projects. This is the basis for generalisations that may be inferred from our argument.

The Discursive Constitution of International Volunteering

International volunteering and international tourism rely for their logic on similar hierarchical distinctions between North and South (Simpson, 2004, 2005). Conventional international tourism discourse and practice actively reproduce ranked distinctions between mobility/immobility, wealthy/poor, gazer/gazed upon, and independent/dependent, all of which constitute a general differentiation between tourists as subjects and locals as objects. International volunteering discourse criticises the hierarchies of conventional tourism and distinguishes itself on these grounds (Wearing, 2001), yet relies on a similar set of essentialised and dualistic distinctions based on an imagined geography that populates the global South with a variety of development needs, and the global North with young people who are willing, able, and entitled to meet these needs through volunteer work (Simpson, 2004).

Our research participants and volunteers quoted in other voluntourism literature (Broad, 2003; Matthews, 2008; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Simpson, 2004; Wearing, 2001), reproduced these dualisms and essentialisations by understanding volunteering in terms of "giving back", "having control", "doing something", and "offering assistance". A "flexible positional superiority" (Said,

1978, 7) is perpetuated, according to which well-meaning young volunteers from the North, most without language skills or project-related training, expect over the course of a few weeks to provide meaningful benefit to Southern populations. Such a strong presumption of Northern agency and Southern need prevails that the impediments of skill, knowledge, duration, familiarity, and language escape consideration. According to Simpson (2004, 685), “this model is based on the assumed value of the enthusiastic western volunteer, who becomes the central, and even only, agent of development. In this sense ‘active’ participation is perceived as predominantly limited to the external, visiting volunteer, rather than being a local prerogative”. Rather than dismantling hierarchical binary distinctions between Northern volunteer and Southern community member, volunteer tourism perpetuates such distinctions at the level of its basic logic.⁴

If the notion of ‘helping’ or ‘doing good’ locates volunteer tourists as the primary agents and subjects in a discourse of international volunteering as international development, then the notion of *self-development* situates them as its key clients. Our study reflects other research in finding that volunteers expected their volunteering stint to have some sort of *self-developmental* effect, and a key component of their subsequent satisfaction was having experienced volunteering to some extent in those terms (Gray and Campbell, 2007; Lepp, 2008; Palmer, 2002; Stoddard and Rogerson, 2004). As Julia remarked, volunteering “helps you learn better skills, learn about yourself and about others, and later on in the future it helps you get better jobs because they know you’ll be more experienced and stuff”. According to Wearing (2001, 3) volunteer tourism “has been built around the belief that by living in and learning about other people and cultures, in an environment of mutual benefit and cooperation, one is able to engage in a transformation and the development of self.” Voluntourism promotional material stresses the self-developmental benefits of volunteering, and voluntourism providers design programs to facilitate it. A program called Cross-Cultural Solutions, for example, assures prospective participants that “all of our volunteers come away with the same benefits – personal growth, having a purpose, gaining independence and confidence, connecting with others, seeing a country from the inside-out”. In this prevalent discourse, “helping” or “doing good” is understood as a key resource for self-development that is uniquely provided by international volunteering.

A discursive privileging of Northern volunteering subjects – manifest as the requirement to enable their self-development – colonises the very notion of what constitutes an appealing volunteering project, influences what “needs”

⁴ The voluntourism literature focuses disproportionately on volunteers’ motivations, their “volunteer experience” and their subsequent reflections. Researchers’ claims about volunteer tourism’s contributions to self-development, trans-cultural understanding, and social or environmental development are based mainly on volunteers’ own inevitably self-interested assessments. The literature is short on studies that examine volunteer tourism’s effects in terms of trans-cultural understanding or social/environmental development *except* as these are understood by volunteers themselves. This itself reproduces in the literature a privileging of the Northern touristic subject and a commensurate indifference to the perspectives of ‘local hosts’.

voluntourism recognises and what counts as “an environment of mutual benefit and cooperation” (Wearing, 2001, 3), and shapes the material arrangement of volunteering programs. Organisations that rely on short-term volunteers must design their programs to satisfy volunteers’ expectations of self-development (Lepp, 2008). Locals’ understandings of their own needs are necessarily secondary, as is active local agency in volunteering projects (Gray and Campbell, 2007; Raymond and Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004).

Among the self-developmental expectations set up by the voluntourism sector and reproduced by academic literature and volunteers themselves, is the prospect that volunteering will provide a more authentic experience of a Southern locale than other forms of short-term travel (Lyons and Wearing, 2008a).⁵ H el ene expressed this expectation as follows: “I wanted to see for myself without someone hiding things from me, and that’s what I feel they do at tourist areas, they kind of make it as much like North America as possible... that’s why coming as a tourist wasn’t an option for me”. The rhetoric that legitimises volunteering by distinguishing it in terms of access to authenticity mobilises standard touristic discourses of distinction, which also operate in related terms of moral superiority, environmental rectitude, adventurousness, depth of interpersonal interaction, and so on. As with discourses of helping and self-development, discourses of distinction situate local people and places as more-or-less passive resources, this time in travelers’ efforts to place themselves near the top of a widely-accepted tourism hierarchy. Despite participants’ assertions that volunteering is not tourism, they all employed tropes of touristic distinction to compare themselves favourably to other types of international travelers.

In summary, volunteer tourism is legitimated as a form of international travel in terms of helping, self-development and authenticity-based distinction, each of which reproduces a differentiation between Northern volunteers and Southern hosts/beneficiaries in which the former are positioned as active subjects and the latter as objects of volunteers’ agency and imagination. This is a non-radical variation on distinctions that discursively structure all tourism, but with added hierarchies associated with discourses of international development. In a context where volunteers are discursively privileged, their satisfaction in terms of self-development and distinction emerges as the primary value of international volunteering. This is a poor medium for nurturing expectations of a transformed tourism that benefits the ‘host community,’ enables trans-cultural understanding, or facilitates volunteers’ own critical reflexive self-development. Such expectations are further undermined by short-term volunteering’s material embeddedness in a tourism infrastructure and economy.

⁵ Some scholars (e.g., Broad, 2003; McGehee and Santos, 2005; McIntosh and Zahra, 2007; Mustonen, 2005) view volunteering as a response to critical tourism studies’ well-developed critique of ‘authenticity of experience’ in touristic encounters (for various perspectives on authenticity in the context of tourism, see Cohen, 1988; Crang, 1996; Kim and Jamal, 2007; MacCannell, 1976; Olsen, 2002).

Infrastructure and Organisation

Several scholars observe that alternative tourism exemplifies a postmodern de-differentiation of formerly separate realms of social life, and note “the decreasing distinctiveness of tourism as a field of social activity” (Uriely *et al.*, 2003, 59; also Lash and Urry, 1994; Munt, 1994). Short-term international volunteering is exemplary of this de-differentiation, as individuals attempt to satisfy altruistic, recreational and self-developmental motivations by combining volunteering activities with vacation travel. We argue above that in the process volunteering becomes subsumed into the dichotomous logic of tourism in which destination populations and environments are objects or resources in travelers’ active pursuit of various types of satisfaction (i.e., “helping,” “self-development,” and “authenticity/distinction”). Another aspect of volunteering’s de-differentiation from conventional tourism, which materialises and institutionalises its touristic discursive logic, is its heavy reliance on a tourism infrastructure and exchange relations.

The majority of short-term international volunteers book trips through for-profit travel companies based in the global North that place volunteers with non-profit organisations in the global South. Volunteering stints are one of several types of alternative travel offered by most of these, and travel packages typically feature volunteering as a trip’s central experience, which may be supplemented by some combination of hotel or home stays, cultural tours, treks or excursions, formal language instruction, and in-country travel. Companies compete with each other and with providers of other types of tourism to attract clients. One way to do this is by offering packages that promise prospective travelers access to “making a difference”, self-development and authenticity, without requiring them to forego the more hedonistic pleasures of a vacation abroad. By interspersing the ‘work’ of international development or conservation with breaks for the ‘play’ of adventure tourism, volunteering packages allow travelers to develop themselves as both volunteers *and* tourists:

Want to be more than a tourist? Have you got a taste for adventure? Do you want to make a real difference to the places you visit rather than just passing by? If so, why not combine adventure travel with important volunteer projects. Imagine... spotting a herd of wild Elephants in South Africa before teaching some English lessons to local children... or hurtling through the Costa Rican jungle on a zip wire after helping save endangered leatherback turtles. Your adventure starts here. (I-to-I Life Changing Travel)

Amidst the rhetoric of helping that permeates volunteer travel companies’ promotional material are claims to provide the most satisfactory travel experience at the lowest price. The home page of one such company, Rustic Volunteer and Travel, offers “Unbeatable Prices – Starting \$499. We will beat the price of any competitor in the USA”. Another company, Volunteering Solutions, “promise[s] to

deliver best value and most professionally delivered volunteering experience for you". Prospective volunteers who browse these agencies' websites are encouraged to proceed as shoppers, finding or assembling a travel package that provides what they want at the lowest price. Travel agencies compete by offering volunteering experiences that fit into a larger vacation package and appeal to prospective volunteers. Rustic Volunteer and Travel's website states the following:

In each [volunteering] destination, we have carefully selected projects, host families, travel coordinating staff, and local support staff. We have provided them with extensive training to manage highly professional services with love and respect for all volunteers... They are very committed to working hard to meet your expectations, deliver professional services, and make your volunteer abroad experience a memorable journey.

The quotation gives a sense of how involved travel companies are in shaping volunteering projects to ensure customer satisfaction. The same is true of non-profit organisations such as Cross-Cultural Solutions, which claims that all their "program sites undergo a comprehensive review process each year to assess their performance in the following areas: program quality, overall volunteer satisfaction, adherence to staff policies, medical procedure training, and security guidelines" as part of their dedication to "monitoring and continuously improving the volunteer experience on a daily basis".

Lash and Urry (1994) suggest that tourism is structured by three sets of exchange relations: "financial exchange for rights to occupy mobile property" (i.e., vehicles), "for temporary possession of accommodations and facilities away from home", and "for the ability to gaze at unfamiliar sites" (paraphrased in Uriely *et al.*, 2003, 59). The de-differentiation of volunteering from tourism places each of these exchange relations at the centre of short-term international volunteering, with the addition of a fourth: financial exchange for the opportunity to undertake volunteer labour. The sector is largely organised to treat volunteering as a set of amenities it provides to paying customers. The point is not that the commercialisation of volunteering necessarily diminishes its value as a practice or experience, but it does contradict the prevalent notion that short-term volunteering offers a less commodified form of leisure than other types of tourism (Wearing, 2001). In such a classically tourist economy customer satisfaction is determinant. The most attractive projects in this context allow for short-term participation with flexible hours, yield quick and easily demonstrable results, facilitate contact between volunteers and locals, are well-organised, safe and emotionally uplifting, require few specialised skills, and package well with a range of other sight-seeing or self-developmental activities. Volunteer travel organisations emphasise these features when they advertise their programs, without acknowledging that in such conditions the benefits of volunteering to host communities are likely to be minimal. The volunteering context and practices that were observed at Kate's research site in

Costa Rica provide an instructive example of how this touristification of volunteering may settle out at the project level.

Volunteering at the farm

The volunteer participants in this study joined a trip organised through a small Canadian for-profit travel company that specialises in service learning experiences in Central America and organises only a few trips each year. The company represents itself in less touristic terms than the large travel organisations we've been quoting, but with a similar emphasis on safety, adventure, personal growth, community development, cross-cultural solidarity, and "the betterment of the world". Like other voluntourism agencies, the one that this study's participants traveled with offers multi-part trips that have one or two volunteer components at their centre. The two week packages that participants undertook with Kate as group facilitator consisted of six days volunteering at the project site, a weekend outing to the Caribbean coast for a riverboat tour, and six days volunteering in an urban setting. The inclusion of an assortment of excursions, fiestas, workshops, language classes, shopping trips, and briefing/debriefing sessions meant that the volunteering component of the two week journey amounted to nine or ten part-days, half of these at the farm.

In 2002 the farm itself consisted of four hectares of partially cultivated, mountainous land, a large medicinal garden, grazing land, stables, residential buildings, meeting areas, outbuildings, and an additional ten hectares of unprotected rainforest, previously damaged through clear-cutting and coffee cultivation. Its non-local owners run it as a non-profit organisation with the mandate to teach local people – most of whom use chemical-intensive methods to grow *cheyote* for export – how to produce food organically and 'naturally,' and to demonstrate the economic feasibility of the ecologically-sustainable practices it advocates. The ostensible role of volunteers is to provide farm labour, as well as to help sustain a variety of associated goals and activities.

The project has facilities for 40 volunteers, but from 2002-4 typically hosted about a dozen at once. In summer most volunteers stayed for about three weeks. Only a few came during the winter, but they typically stayed much longer. Volunteers paid US\$15 a day for food and lodgings, with reduced rates for long stays. Three or four young Costa Rican university students on hiatus lived and worked on the farm without paying fees or earning wages. They provided specialised skills and often led foreign volunteers in work projects. The farm was also home to a few nominally paid international 'staff members,' who were hired to coordinate the international volunteers. Staff turnover was high. In addition, between four and ten local workers were employed on the farm, depending on how many volunteers were present and how much money was available to pay them. Local men supervised volunteers in work projects and often contributed most of the labour. A few other local men and women helped teach volunteers Spanish, and

several women worked in the kitchen cooking for the staff and volunteers. Local employees lived in their homes in the near-by village.

Three interrelated problems plagued the project from the start. First, it had difficulty attracting the numbers and types of volunteers needed to run the farm substantially on volunteer labour. Few volunteers had the commitment to do dirty, repetitive, tiring farm work day after day; even fewer had specialised skills to tackle more interesting agricultural jobs. Second, the farm was far from sustaining itself through the sale of agricultural produce, partly because it didn't produce enough, and partly because in the absence of skilled volunteer labour much of the work was done by locals whose wages raised the cost of sustainability. Third, the farm's activities seemed not to interest local inhabitants except to the extent that they provided direct employment. Locals seldom attended demonstrations offered at the farm and seemed skeptical of claims that organic farming is an economically sustainable option for them. They were interested in the project mainly as a source of employment, which the farm owners tried to supply as a way both to provide tangible good to the community and to sustain some level of local engagement with the farm.

In this context the \$15 per day volunteers paid and the employment they generated was more important to the project's survival than was the labour they provided. Without volunteers' payment local workers couldn't be hired to sustain the farm's agricultural activities, and without volunteers' presence the farm would need fewer local labourers to cook, lead volunteer crews, offer language instruction, and so on; the more international volunteers there were on the farm, the more local labourers were hired.

Attracting enough volunteer guests to provide reliable local employment and sustain the farm's activities was a major challenge that the owners tried to address by partnering with travel companies specialising in voluntourism. In terms of materially useful farming labour, the short-term visitors these agencies supplied to the farm weren't ideal, but they contributed cash and generated employment, and so the project adapted its operations to provide the experiences travel companies wanted for their customers, for whom a few days of volunteer work at the farm was part of a more varied adventure. The farm developed three strategies to attract more volunteers and suit the expectations of voluntourism packages; these were (a) designing new volunteering opportunities that guests find more rewarding than farm work, (b) offering supplementary recreational and self-developmental activities, and (c) creating structured opportunities for volunteers to interact with community members. These strategies shifted the farm's activities away from volunteer-powered rural development and toward a quirky sort of agricultural tourism, while retaining a *discursive* emphasis on providing a locally-relevant model of alternative farming.

During Kate's first research season (2003), for example, the volunteers in her group were given the task of painting and erecting wooden signs to mark a path

through the farm's forest and to identify plants along the way. The project was designed to offer volunteers a group-focused alternative to farm work that would involve energetic activity in the scenic outdoors and engage them in a process of safe and constrained creativity, exploration and achievement. Over the course of Kate's association with the farm, it offered an increasing array of add-ons or alternatives to volunteering on an intermittent basis. Among them were efforts to improve opportunities for interaction between locals and international visitors, including locating the farm's internet café in the nearby village, organising meals with local families, encouraging locals to visit the farm, and involving volunteers in environmental education outreach activities. These were all sensible ways to attract more visitors, get them to stay longer, and allow them to spend more money, and the farm's owners strove to share any successes in these regards with local people. But each of them further constituted the farm as an operation that survived less by receiving services from international volunteers and more by selling them services, and in the process diverted more of the farm's resources away from its ostensible sustainable development goals. This trend was troubling to many, including Joel, one of the Costa Rican workers:

We need to have the organic farm working sufficiently because in reality, this is a farm. And everything tells me that everything focuses on the international volunteers as the principle source of resources and it is really good to have foreign volunteers for an intercultural exchange, but it seems to me it shouldn't be the primary goal.

Even in its most micro-context of day-to-day choices and activities, volunteering at the farm was organised by the three touristic exchange relations identified by Lash and Urry (1994). Ironically, the one form of exchange relation unique to voluntourism – payment for the opportunity to undertake volunteer labour – lost importance as volunteering time was eroded by other pursuits and volunteering activities became more touristic in their increasing focus on volunteers' satisfaction. Visitors had little opportunity but to treat volunteering as a tourist amenity when the micro-context of the project, and the short duration of most travelers' stay, positioned it so firmly thus.

Duration

International volunteering varies widely in terms of duration, ranging from multi-year assignments with organisations such as Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO; Cook, 2007) to brief excursions of a week or so. Callahan and Thomas (2005) found that in 2004 over 40 percent of the 1,064 project activities advertised on the popular Volunteer Abroad website were less than four weeks in duration. The authors note that few of these short-term placements require specialised skills, and that most focus largely on volunteers' self-development, leading them to doubt whether such placements contribute much either to trans-cultural understanding between tourists and host communities, or to the social development or environmental sustainability of locations where tourists volunteer. Other critical

voluntourism literature expresses similar reservations (Raymond and Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004; Guttentag, 2009), as does work that approaches the issue of volunteering from the perspective of international development. Peter Devereux (2008, 360; Palmer, 2002) notes, for example, that in 2006 the long-term volunteer provider, VSO, publicly warned “that the proliferating gap year programmes might become a new form of colonialism, reinforcing an attitude of ‘it’s all about us’ by their emphasis on short-term ‘helping’ over learning”. Although not all potentially negative impacts of volunteering can be blamed on short duration, there is some agreement that duration is a significant limiting factor.

The volunteers in this study were short-term by any standard. Those who traveled with groups Kate guided spent only six days on the farm, and independent travelers to the farm seldom stayed more than a month. Most spent only two weeks abroad; the rest stretched their time in Costa Rica by a few more weeks at most. On their calendars and in their bankbooks the trip occupied the space of an overseas holiday in conditions of financial and temporal scarcity. In this context, value for money and time was central, and the decision to volunteer was weighed against the opportunity costs of not doing something else. Participants certainly wanted to volunteer for reasons of altruism, authenticity and self-development, but they didn’t want to *just* volunteer in the short time they had.⁶ They were continually distracted from volunteering by the prospect of hanging out with other travelers and “checking out” other places as they would on a more conventional low-budget backpacking journey, or going on excursions to the cloud forest or on riverboats as they would on an adventure travel vacation. A few hours of desultory volunteering often served as justification for a more overtly touristic treat. The organised packages participants purchased were designed according to this logic; other volunteers improvised on a daily basis, or planned ahead so that a short time at the farm fit into a longer adventure or backpacker vacation. Information constantly filtered back to the farm of more authentic, alternative or organic projects in more exotic locales, and some volunteers who were not on organised trips came and went, following stories of greener pastures. By the end of their time at the farm most were imagining or planning future holidays in Costa Rica or elsewhere. While volunteers were at the project, the short duration of their stay relegated them almost inevitably to the status of paying guests, at best superficial participants in the life of the farm and adjacent community, regardless of their prior hopes.

Few volunteers were with the project long enough to make friends with locals, understand how the farm works, explore their environment independently, or learn how properly to do the tasks they were assigned, and so they relied on

⁶ In a study of sustainable tourism behaviour, Budeanu (2007) cites data that 70-80% of tourists favour environmentally sustainable tourism practices, but only about 10% alter their behavior accordingly. Her analysis suggests tourists invest too much time and money in their vacation travel to risk diminishing a holiday experience by opting for sustainable travel or supporting responsible tourism products. We think a similar dynamic influenced Kate’s participants’ voluntourism practices.

others to guide them through their experiences. That Spanish language skills were rare among volunteers exacerbated the superficiality and dependency of their experiences. Had they stayed longer, they may have become valuable to the farm and community for the labour they provided, the ideas they generated, and the social relations they developed; as it was, their prerogative to “temporarily possess accommodations and facilities away from home and gaze at unfamiliar sites” was based almost entirely on a prototypically touristic financial exchange (paraphrased from Uriely *et al.*, 2003, 59).⁷

The effects of this superficiality and dependency were multiple and self-reinforcing. Volunteers realised they weren’t on the farm long enough to master the appropriate skills or to see their labour bear fruit, and some felt they were mainly in the way when they were working:

I did construction with Isa [a local worker] for a couple of days, and while he was nailing and hammering and sawing, I couldn’t do it as quickly or as professionally as he could. So, I did as much as I could. So definitely the hired workers did the majority of the work, and the harder work, while the volunteers were there more for the experience. You know, I had never nailed something and I had never sawed something before, so I did what I could, but, I don’t know... I thought that it wasn’t really what I was there to do. (Simone)

For some participants this was sufficient incentive to drift away from a commitment to volunteering; the majority adjusted to the limitations of duration by shifting their focus from helping to learning:

I felt more isolated because I don’t have a background in agriculture and I’ve never been on a farm before. I didn’t feel that I was that much of a – I had that strong of a role in actually farming, so I guess my role would be like a student, like learning. I was just someone who came to learn as opposed to someone who came to really lend a hand. (Hélène)

If, as we argue, limited duration is one reason volunteers never settled comfortably into the labour that sustains the farm, it combines with language difficulties to help account for why they didn’t feel comfortable wandering off the farm or interacting with locals who didn’t work there, despite their stated motivation to experience local culture and forge trans-cultural relationships. Julia commented that “off the farm property I didn’t feel that I was integrated into the community very well, but I didn’t get the sense it was an intentional thing... I mean maybe if I had spent more than a week there, maybe if I was there for a month then that wouldn’t have been something that happened.” Volunteers’ lack of interaction with the local community was a source of consternation to the farm’s

⁷ The project’s 2009 schedule of fees provides a crude indication of the value placed on volunteers’ labour contributions; the daily rate is \$22 for vacationers and \$20 for volunteers.

owners, one of whom commented that although volunteers “say that they like very much contact with the community they still don’t use it a lot. They don’t go out a lot... they could walk more in the community, use more activities of the community... they are all so afraid of the contact”. This unease was evident in volunteers’ descriptions of the social landscape outside the farm proper. It is worth quoting Mary at length in this regard:

Obviously, the internet café because of its association with the farm, felt like a very safe place, felt like an open to anything kind of place and so we weren’t afraid to go there. We even spent a few nights there. But, the soccer field was also welcoming, except for the fact that it was on a cliff and you might lose your ball. And then, maybe it changes at night time—because I know that when we were walking by ourselves at night, I felt a little bit uneasy sometimes, just because, you do have a trust in everyone, and it’s almost maybe a false trust. Like, you don’t know what these people are capable of and you don’t know what they’re like, but for some reason you, like because you trust the farm, you seem to trust everyone and so, I felt OK going around at night, but then maybe if I was alone, which thank god we never really were, I would have felt differently... So I wouldn’t go too many places by myself. I didn’t really venture, besides our walks once in a while, where we went all together down the road. Besides that I didn’t really venture very far on my own.

Mary’s wary approach to local people and places beyond the farm gate contrasts with her trust in fellow travelers and the space of the farm. This common dichotomy reflected and fueled volunteers’ dependency, ultimately separating them from ‘local culture’, and isolating them on the farm where they interacted mainly with other volunteers. Many participants, Mary included, described developing friendships with other international volunteers as the most satisfying aspect of their trip:

It’s a lot of the same people who have similar ideals to mine and so when I was there I remember I had incredible discussions with other people and even if I was just listening to other people speak, it was never like, a conversation I got annoyed with, it was always something that I admired people for or that I was getting something from... I don’t want to say, good people and “people more like me” in the same breath, because that seems kind of like, a little too egotistical, but at the same time it seems like the type of people who would go to something like this seem to me to be good people and people I admire, and so the kind of volunteer that would go there is generally someone that I would get along with better.

As the preceding quotation indicates, participants undoubtedly had what they understood as meaningful intersubjective trans-cultural interactions, but because of

language barriers, wariness of the local 'other', spatial isolation on the farm, and the limitations of duration, these were with like-minded fellow travelers from the North, rather than with members of the local farming community. Volunteering provided an important context and discursive resource for travelers from various Northern backgrounds to bond with each other but at the cost of forming relationships with locals. To be fair, it would have been difficult for volunteers to establish close and sustained interactions with local people without barging uninvited into villagers' homes or arranging to take meals with a local family (itself a monetary exchange relationship arranged by the farm). In this context of physical and social segregation and translation difficulties, volunteers can hardly be blamed for interacting mainly with one another.

This isn't what the farm's owners imagined when they founded the project. They thought the farm's development-oriented goals would be served by longer-term volunteers who could contribute sustained agricultural labour, immerse themselves in courses of language instruction or sustainable development, and develop sufficiently comfortable relations with the local community to participate in outreach activities. But the farm didn't attract enough committed long-term volunteers to sustain that model, so they had to rely more on short-term volunteer payment than long-term volunteer labour, and that meant attracting short-duration visitors, often in organised groups. The farm adapted to its dependency on short-term vacationers in the ways described in the previous section, thus reinforcing volunteers' positioning as tourists.

To summarise our argument so far, the project's owners were compelled by local contingencies and their positioning in the tourism sector to offer a more touristic volunteering experience than they had anticipated, thereby relinquishing to a large extent their vision of rural development through volunteer labour. Volunteers on the other hand encountered themselves as touristic subjects at every turn: in the discourses that saturate the voluntourism promotional literature and provide the logic for international volunteering; in their reliance on a tourism infrastructure and the constant mediation of their experiences by financial exchange; in their desire to make the most of an expensive few weeks abroad; in the sorts of opportunities they encountered at the farm; in their realisation that they are essential to the project from a financial perspective and largely superfluous in terms of their volunteer labour; in their dependency, fear, and alienation from the local world beyond the farm; and in the resulting "stickiness" of their attachment to one another (Saldhana, 2007). These circumstances were stony ground for nourishing participants' idealised notions of giving, responsibility, reciprocity, and self-affirmation. The result was a gradual process of disillusionment that contributes to the dimensions described above in explaining volunteering's failure to 'transform' participants' brief travel experience into something more than conventional tourism.

Disillusioned Volunteers

Participants' engagement with volunteering was characterised by several slippages: (a) between their idealistic notions of volunteer service and how they behaved as volunteers; (b) between what they expected of international volunteering in general and what they expected from their own volunteering experience; and (c) between understanding themselves as volunteers and performing themselves as tourists. Each slippage played out spatially and temporally as participants gradually lowered their expectations of themselves as volunteers, of volunteering as a practice of helping and trans-cultural understanding, and of the farm as a context for 'making a difference'. This first occurred with their spatial transition from Canada to rural Costa Rica, and second, over the duration of their trip. These transitions mark the shift from an abstract, dematerialised set of understandings and expectations characterised by a discourse of 'other-benefit' tempered by 'mutual-benefit', to a concrete, embodied and materially-situated set of understandings, experiences and behaviours that were characterised by practices and discourses of 'self-benefit'.⁸

An important aspect of this shift was volunteers' realisation that the farm wasn't succeeding as a development project. This insight was inspired by conversations with longer-term volunteers, supported by the experience of 'being there' for a few days, and nurtured as a popular topic of conversation among themselves. There was a widespread sense that the farm was failing to demonstrate and disseminate organic farming as an economically viable venture, and was relying too heavily on volunteers' payment to sustain a faltering project that wasn't having much practical effect on the local community. According to Mary, "they're not as successful in producing enough to show that organic agriculture is a beneficial method of feeding your family... it's difficult to show that organic agriculture *can* be just as successful, because if you can't make it work, then it won't be". Volunteers' doubts about the farm's capacity to transform volunteering into "other-benefit" together with their discomfort with how stark the financial exchange was that translated their payment into locals' wages led them to question their own purposes in volunteering.

As volunteers became increasingly skeptical of the opportunities the project provided for other-benefit their discourse shifted from doing to learning (i.e., from other-benefit to self-development). This shift is exemplified in a passage from Julia's interview where she admits that "at first I felt that I wasn't really doing a lot, because, how could weeding a garden or stuff like that really make a big

⁸ The temporality of this process of disillusionment played out clearly over the course of post-trip interviews, as questioning moved from the general to the specific, and from motivation to experience. The resulting temporal narrative of disillusionment is structured partly by the contingencies of the interviews and the disciplining effects of narrative conventions, but we're confident that the transition we describe is 'actual' and not simply an artifact of interview design, because it is also evident in shifts in volunteers' behaviours and the character of their casual conversations over the course of the trip.

difference to anybody?”. Over the course of the placement (and the passage) she reassured herself that “a lot of it really relates back to not just the work you’re doing, but the social experiences you’re getting out of it”, leading her to conclude that “the conversations you had while you were doing [the weeding] had more importance than the actual work itself”. This shift from doing to learning sat uneasily with most participants, who retained hope that their self-development experience would yield some benefit for people in need. Hélène’s sanguine conclusion that “in the end I think it’s beneficial for everyone involved” typified this notion of reciprocal altruism (cf. Söderman and Snead, 2008). For several participants what seemed to make the volunteering experience mutually beneficial, even “sort of the best of both worlds” (Julia), was the money volunteers spent: “we get to donate the money and you get to go and work on the project yourself, so you’re really seeing where your money’s going and how it’s affecting the people that are benefiting from it” (Julia). Other participants shared Luce’s even more muted hope that “if I can do anything, like that’s great; that’s better than nothing.”

These rationalisations constitute an on-the-fly justification for the situation volunteers found themselves in: clients whose money contributed to the local economy and bought a self-developmental experience. Volunteering practice diminished in importance as travelers came to treat it more as a source of experience than as a way to offer practical help. In the process of replacing labour with payment as the prime mode of ‘other-benefit’, the ideal of international volunteering as a way to disturb hierarchical relations between North and South also suffered, and the hierarchies of wealth were firmly reinstated. However, even after participants had relinquished hope that their labour would yield material benefits to the local community, they retained some faith in volunteering’s capacity to generate trans-cultural understanding. Julia, for example, understood volunteering as a gesture of interest in the ‘other’ that nourishes intersubjectivity:

I think people are much more likely to want to integrate you into their culture and community if you are working with them, and I think by doing that you’re showing more of an interest in really wanting to learn about them... by offering your time and energy to work with somebody else on their garden or daycare or whatever it is you’re working on, it gives them the sense that you really are truly interested in what it is they’re doing and you’re not just a tourist standing back and watching them.

Almost all volunteers Kate traveled with thought that working side-by-side with locals, getting dirty and sweaty together, and living close to the community, facilitated mutual understanding and gave them a more authentic overseas experience. But they did little practically to nurture opportunities for meaningful interaction with locals. While on the farm premises volunteers were most comfortable exclusively in the company of each other, and most felt awkward, out of place and a bit afraid when they ventured off the farm. They didn’t know what was appropriate, were worried about offending, didn’t want to be exploitive, and

couldn't read many cues from a local population that seemed indifferent to their presence.

The understandings volunteers developed of life in rural Costa Rica were largely the product of brief and superficial encounters as interpreted in conversation with other volunteers whose experiences were similarly constrained. Volunteers gained almost no empirical sense of local perspectives, and little of local life worlds. Virtually the only trans-cultural intersubjectivity that could develop in such circumstances was among volunteers, for whom the shared project of interpreting their surroundings and constituting themselves thereby as citizens of the world was an important source of mutuality. In the end, volunteers contented themselves with that.⁹

We have been describing a process of disillusionment with the material and intersubjective aspects of international volunteering as participants experienced it, which results from the conjuncture of circumstances described in previous subsections. Volunteers responded to their disillusionment in varied and inconsistent ways, but primarily by giving up a practiced commitment to volunteering as a way to help others and dismantle asymmetrical relations of power between North and South, and by recasting themselves as customers whose expenditures were beneficial to the host community, whose volunteer efforts did no harm, and whose comportment was at least more sensitive than most tourists. In this way volunteers' disillusionment itself became a contributing factor in eroding the potential for volunteer tourism at this site to have a transformative effect in the areas of social or ecological development and trans-cultural understanding, but also in terms of those aspects of self-development that were imagined to stem from labouring freely with and for the benefit of others in need.

Volunteering as Better Tourism – Transformative Effects?

Much academic literature on short-term international volunteering supports voluntourism providers and short-term volunteers themselves in nourishing the discourse that international volunteering offers tangible benefits to others in need, facilitates trans-cultural understanding between Northern and Southern selves, and nurtures the development and transformation of self. Despite a growing critical literature, this prevalent discourse understands volunteering as having potential to transform a vacation abroad into something more than tourism, an "alternative to market-driven ideologies" that provides "forms of tourism experience with significantly different outcomes" (Wearing, 2001, 41). We argue above that almost the opposite happened at Kate's study site as all aspects of volunteering were subordinated to touristic logic and practice, and we offer reasons why the anticipated ennobling transformation of tourism didn't occur.

⁹ Simone was the sole exception among interview participants. She spent several weeks at the farm, spoke fluent Spanish, arranged to eat a few meals with a local family, and volunteered at the nearby primary school, which gave her as rich an exposure to the community as the context allowed.

But what effects did volunteering nevertheless have in terms of local benefit, trans-cultural intersubjectivity, and traveler self-development? We provide elements of an answer to that question in the preceding discussion. Our remaining task is to construct a summary evaluation of effects. This is straightforward in terms of local benefit and trans-cultural intersubjectivity; the matter of volunteers' self-development is more complex because a potential effect of the disillusionment we describe in the previous discussion is self-awareness and the refiguring of self.

Local Social/Ecological Development

Volunteering at the farm has contributed little to the social or ecological development of the surrounding area. By all accounts, including the project's owners, the local population was uninterested in the agricultural practices advocated by the farm and viewed their viability with skepticism. Those few local farmers who attended workshops had little opportunity to practice what they learned, because their livelihood relies on intensively mono-cropping *cheyote* for export. Almost no volunteers had the know-how to teach organic or ecologically sustainable farming practices to locals, so their contributions in this regard were limited to providing money and labour to keep the farm limping along as an example of eco-agriculture in practice. In fact, international volunteers contributed little labour either to sustaining the farm or protecting its small rainforest; most of the work was done by local workers who were hired as needed.

The \$15/day volunteers paid at the time of Kate's research to stay at the farm did contribute some employment income to the local population and enabled the farm to protect the few hectares of rainforest that are on the property. But the small amount of paid labour offered on the farm has the attributes of low pay, instability, intermittency and low skill that characterise other forms of tourism employment; the work was appreciated by those who got it, but was hardly a source of social development. Rather, local employment on the farm was entirely dependent on the travel whims of the international volunteers it served, thus reproducing trans-cultural relations of dependency and powerlessness. This wasn't lost on interview participants, despite the prevailing rhetoric of mutual benefit. The best Mary could say was that she doesn't "feel that volunteers being at the farm are especially detrimental to the community, except maybe for the fact that a dependence does exist on the volunteers, to sustain the farm". In comparing the volunteering project to more mainstream business and development ventures, Mary consoled herself with the thought that "we're probably not as detrimental in what we're doing, and we're maybe nicer about it".

Trans-cultural Communication and Understanding

As we describe above, interactions between locals and volunteers were brief, superficial and constrained by language barriers and the context of financial exchange. Volunteers stuck together, and so engaged with the local population as part of a group. Except for those few volunteers who paid to have a meal with a local family, or found themselves working alone alongside a local employee, they

seldom had one-to-one interactions with locals. Although volunteers said they wanted and expected to forge lasting intersubjective relationships with local ‘others’, none of Kate’s participants developed friendships with locals that extended beyond their visit, and few could describe any but the most superficial interactions with local people in their post-trip interviews. This is not to say they learned nothing about Costa Rica or the people who live there; most participants felt they had learned a lot. Luce, for example, went to Costa Rica because she “wanted to learn about a whole different community”, and valued her volunteering experience because “you learn about the watchamacallit, the plant life, flora and all that, the fauna. It’s just much more enriching for me”. Other participants described more specific – and perhaps more profound – insights: “I remember the dad at the home we were at was showing us his gorgeous *cheyotes* and he was so proud that they were going to Italy and Canada and all over the world to be sold. And that kind of hit me—I was just like, “Oh, they’re proud of this. I forgot” you know?... This is what he gets to do in life” (Mary).

But this sort of learning about a different culture by observing difference first-hand is an unreliable path to the sort of mutual understanding volunteers expected and voluntourism agencies advertise. The latter requires something closer to “communicative action” (Habermas, 1981), a process of intersubjectively validating one another’s experiences in conditions of relatively equal power and linguistic competence with the goal of constructing shared understandings and interests. The brief, superficial and largely mute encounters volunteers had with locals may actually have impeded the goal of mutual understanding that is often associated with international volunteering, by allowing volunteers to mistake one-sided feelings of camaraderie for intersubjective understanding, and by providing what may have seemed like empirical validation for existing stereotypes (cf. Grusky, 2000; Matthews, 2008; Simpson, 2004).¹⁰ The latter was evident in volunteers’ occasionally disparaging comments about Costa Ricans operating on “Tico time”, and their often simplistic assessments of locals’ “need” and “poverty.”

Conditions more conducive to intersubjective understanding existed among volunteers, who spent long hours trading life stories and self-descriptions, comparing travel experiences, and developing interpretations of Costa Rica as they encountered it together. In the process they constructed themselves as a group with a shared taste for adventure, a common dislike for conventional tourism, and similar commitments to improving the world. In post-trip interviews, participants insisted that volunteering enabled them to develop deep friendships with extraordinary people who shared their interests and commitments, and thereby validated their senses of self. As with most constructions of community, this one

¹⁰ The volunteering literature provides numerous examples of authors uncritically accepting volunteers’ assumptions that their own feelings of closeness to members of a host community indicate mutual understanding between hosts and guests (e.g., McIntosh and Zahra, 2007, 551). We read these less as examples of meaningful interpersonal experiences, than as a projection of mutuality enabled by intergenerational and trans-cultural relations of power.

relies on discourses of distinction: between volunteers and other less-‘embedded’ forms of travelers; between volunteers and locals, who function as resources rather than participants in the pursuit of intersubjective understanding; and to some extent among volunteers, on the basis of adventurousness, travel experience, language competence, and length of stay. The resulting terrain of mutual understanding is remarkable only in its similarities with other small-group tourism contexts.

Volunteers’ Self-Development

Volunteer tourism literature, including much of the critical literature, associates international volunteering with a wide variety of instrumental self-benefits ranging from the pragmatic (e.g., resume building, skills development, course credit) to the ephemeral (e.g., feelings of distinctiveness, authenticity of experience, social and environmental awareness). Study participants expected these sorts of self-benefits, and those who were volunteering for school credit had planned for them. They weren’t disappointed in this regard. Participants emphasised that volunteering had rewarded them with a range of immediate and longer-term advantages, while also offering an international travel experience absent of “tourist guilt.”¹¹ These self-benefits made the trip worthwhile for volunteers, but they differ little from the advantages of many other forms of tourism. They aren’t forms of self-development that promise the transformation of self, North-South relations, or tourism.

In addition to these instrumental self-benefits, some scholars see in volunteer tourism the potential for a transformative refiguring of tourists’ self and identity (Broad, 2003; Butler, 1990; Lyons and Wearing, 2008b; Singh and Singh, 2004; Wearing, 2001, 2002; Wearing and Neil, 2000). Wearing’s (2001) pioneering study of volunteer tourists in Costa Rica is cited extensively to support the position “that meaning is given to the [volunteering] experience through social interaction which may involve a renegotiation of the individual’s identity” (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007, 543), a renegotiation that includes “increased awareness of self; increased awareness of others; and, ultimately, personal growth and development” (Lepp, 2008, 86). Wearing (2001, 2002) argues that alternative tourism – and especially volunteer tourism – can enable travelers to engage with “others” (whether human or environmental) in ways that cause those others to become incorporated into travelers’ own identities and understandings of the world. Volunteers seek exotic otherness as voraciously as any tourists, but the unique nature and orientation of encounters that volunteering affords is imagined to allow them to escape the endless and ultimately unsatisfying cycle of consuming and expelling otherness that characterises the conduct of most tourist selves, and thereby to enable their reflexive self-transformation. According to this line of

¹¹ A couple of participants understood the latter to be both an immediate and a longer term advantage: immediate in that volunteering allowed them not to feel guilty about their trip to the global South; longer term in that having volunteered this time would make them feel better about taking a more conventional holiday next time.

argument, as reflexive self-transformation occurs, so does a transformation of Northern self/Southern other relations and of international tourism.

We haven't explored the issue of transformative reflexive self-development with any of the participants since the study's completion in 2004, so we don't know if this effect was realised in the long-term.¹² In the short-run, participants' self-reflections seem mainly to have fostered a degree of disillusionment with the material and intersubjective aspects of volunteering as they experienced it, which helped them become more cognisant of the trans-cultural relations of privilege and inequality their experience had been complicit in. Only the least thoughtful of Kate's interview participants returned from Costa Rica without feeling that their positioning, behaviour and effects at the project had diverged troublingly from what they expected before they went (cf. Tiessen, 2009).

This process of growing social and self-awareness led participants over the course of the trip from an earnest, enthusiastic mode of engagement to a somewhat more ironic one, in which contradictions, inconsistencies, complicity, even seeming hypocrisy were more recognisable, but also more tolerable. Uninspired or unprepared to explore those contradictions and inconsistencies deeply, they reconciled themselves with tourism, enjoyed their pleasure and sought justification in familiar claims to distinction and authenticity, thereby missing the chance to commit more deeply to reflexively transforming themselves in relation to others. Few volunteers took advantage even of the scant opportunities the farm provided to contribute locally meaningful labour or establish relations of mutuality with local people, much less expending the considerable effort it would have taken to seek these out. In post-trip interviews none of them expressed plans to seek a future volunteering experience that would live up to their ideals, but several were planning more overtly touristic overseas trips, and Mary had just returned from Europe:

I got back from Costa Rica and I guess you could say I was all proud of myself because I felt that I had done something. I had been a tourist without being – without leaving a negative footprint – or without leaving a footprint... It was maybe cocky of me to think this, but it was almost as if I was thinking of myself as like – not one of those tourists I didn't like. And then, when I got home, I started planning a trip to [Europe], where I was for a month and I *was* one of those tourists that was like—I was doing the shopping and, I kind of like made myself feel better by saying I wasn't—I was staying mostly in an apartment that was there and not being used, kind of thing. And I wasn't, I didn't

¹² The consent form participants were asked to sign didn't allow for re-contact after the completion of Kate's MA project. It is possible that the volunteering experience has had transformative effects on participants' identities in the longer term. Participants in a study by McGehee and Santos (2005) felt that short-term international volunteering had contributed to a process of networking, consciousness raising, and social movement activism that impacted their identities over many years.

spend obscene amounts of money. And I didn't go to places that were not supposed to be there in my mind... I didn't do anything like that, but at the same time, it was more of a trip that I could feel guilty about.

Mary's sheepish efforts to justify drifting so quickly from volunteering to another type of tourist experience reveal an element of self-criticism: a certain disappointment with herself combined with worry about losing the sense of distinctiveness that her ostensibly 'leave-no-footprint' trip to Costa Rica gave her. These sorts of concerns were expressed often in interviews, although not always with Mary's degree of self-doubt. More often, participants' discomfort about the transition from volunteering to more conventional forms of tourism focused on the prospect of losing distinction within a tourism hierarchy.

Like Mary, other volunteers regretted their quick transition back to ordinariness, but still congratulated themselves on the distinctiveness of their holiday experience. They felt bad for not working harder at the farm or immediately after to sustain the commitments and behaviours they associated with volunteering, but with little effect on their subsequent behaviour at least in the short-term. We got no sense of the sort of self-transformation imagined in the voluntourism literature, despite evidence of small gains in self-awareness. Although the experience of volunteering made volunteers more cognisant of their trans-cultural positioning as privileged clients in a touristic mode, it also made them more accepting of it.

Conclusion

Volunteer tourism clearly delivers significant transformations in tourism and the tourists, including the fostering of an ethos of 'self-other care' (Wearing, 2002, 254-255), promoting sustainable community development through which the host community is empowered (see Wearing, 1993), fostering involvement in new social movements and activism (McGehee, 2002; McGehee and Norman, 2002; McGehee and Santos, 2005) and demonstrating a powerful example of how tourism can be redirected away from a narrow economic focus to human welfare and ecocentrism (Wearing, 2002; Wearing *et al.*, 2005; Wearing and Ponting, 2006). (Higgins-Desboilles and Russell-Mundine, 2008, 186)

The preceding epigraph summarises a dominant theme in both academic literature on volunteer tourism and the voluntourism sector's self-promotional discourse. Considerable effort has been devoted to making this argument, and to enumerating the sorts of best practices that enable these potential transformations (Lyons and Wearing, 2008a; Raymond and Hall, 2008). Only recently has sustained attention been paid to questioning this prevailing discourse, and little of that has critically examined specific empirical cases that failed to yield the anticipated transformations. Drawing on qualitative research at an organic farming project in Costa Rica we have attempted such a critical empirical examination.

This paper's specific contribution is to show how the discursive constitution of volunteering and its embeddedness in a tourism infrastructure combined with the limitations of duration to shape both the characteristics of a specific volunteering project and the experiences of international travelers who volunteered there. Kate followed two groups of short-term volunteers through the course of their placements, from briefing meetings before arriving at the farm through to interviews several weeks after their return to Canada. This enabled us to understand her participants' volunteering experience as a dynamic one in which they became progressively disillusioned with the project, with their own volunteering practice, and with some of the volunteering ideals they brought with them to Costa Rica. We argue that this disillusionment emerged from the other dimensions we discuss and joined them as a reason for volunteering's failure to transform. We have not encountered this argument in other voluntourism literature, and we think it offers a fruitful avenue for further research, preferably through ethnographic studies that follow larger samples of participants from before until long after their volunteer placement is over. If volunteers' experiences are dynamic in the way we have described, then it is insufficient to gather data solely by interviewing volunteers at a single point during or after their placement. Of course, research on the perspectives of host populations is also much needed.

We conclude that in this instance international volunteering did not yield discernable material contributions to social development or environmental sustainability in the host community, meaningful trans-cultural understanding between locals and volunteers, or, in the short-term at least, transformative reflexive self-development among volunteers. Nor did it "challenge the very foundations of contemporary tourism and capitalist globalisation" (Higgins-Desboilles and Russell-Mundine, 2008, 186). Rather, "volunteerism" was almost entirely subordinated to "tourism" as a framework for imagining, understanding, coordinating, and performing Northern selves in the context of participants' trips to Costa Rica.

As in any empirical case, explanation here hinges on the local and contingent. To that extent it is reasonable to say that the example of voluntourism we describe is uncharacteristic, the exception to a more transformative norm. Certainly, the study participants' volunteering placement was shorter and less intense than many, although not exceptional in this regard. It involved little of the pre-trip preparation, ongoing briefing, or post-trip debriefing that much voluntourism and service-learning literature advocates (Jones and Swanson, 2009; Raymond, 2008; Wade, 2000), and that some organisations offer. It may also be the case that this study's participants were less introspective than most volunteers, and that the farm's owners were unusually poorly-positioned to challenge the obviously touristic aspects of the sector. But, as we have tried to show, local contingencies and subjectivities are shaped and constrained by conditions of possibility that transcend the local. Some other short-term international volunteering programs no doubt offer volunteers a more informed encounter with 'otherness', deeper integration

into local culture, clearer material ‘other-benefits’ and opportunities for fuller introspection. But we don’t think that allows them to escape their positioning in a field of power that reifies ‘otherness’ and perpetuates inequality through the very discourses and mechanisms that legitimise and enable them, whether or not volunteer selves are transformed in the process.

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