

Preface

This book represents an attempt to encapsulate the enthusiasm and positive attempts to use tourism as a means of support for both youth and communities. In a global society that increasingly finds dogma and marketing used to instil values and exploit social relations, volunteer tourism represents both an opportunity and a means of value-adding in an industry that seems to represent consumer capitalism at its worst.

With transnationals everywhere attempting to recast themselves as people-friendly it is time to recognize that they are not the ones who are contributing to any real form of growth for developing countries and local communities. The transnational tourism organizations have pursued the colonialization cum globalization agenda on a 'free and fair trade agenda' for decades, suggesting that a free market economy espouses those principles theorized by Adam Smith in defiance of the system of mercantilism. These are the ideals of a laissez-faire system of government and regulation, free competition, and supply and demand. Mass tourism operates efficiently in this market system, as there are no or few regulations to infringe on operations. Tourism in the free market economy uses and exploits natural resources as a means of profit accumulation and has been described as the commercialization of the human need to travel. This profits the tourism industry promoters and has led to the exploitation of host communities, their culture and environment. This book presents volunteer tourism as an alternative approach. Tourism perpetuates inequality, with the multi-national companies of the advanced capitalist countries retaining the economic power and resources to invest in and control the tourism industries of developing nations. In many cases, a developing country's engagement with tourism serves to simply confirm its dependent, subordinate position in relation to advanced capitalist societies – this can be expressed as a form of neo-colonialism. Developed nations' economic

patterns of consumption have enabled transnational tourism organizations to use modern tourism as a vehicle for packaging developing nations cultures as 'commodities of difference', filling a commercially created need in the mass consciousness. The ability of the developed nations to dominate market forces through the tourism industry is changing the shape of developing nations' communities. We find that indigenous cultures that have changed little for centuries are threatened by the powerful influences of Western culture that often accompany the arrival of mass tourism in the developing world.

Volunteer tourism offers an alternative which, in a way, looks forward to the future. However, can volunteer tourism provide a different experience? The experiences presented in this book are offered as a means of best practice in tourism. The focus is around the idea that the volunteer tourism experience is a direct interactive experience that causes value change and changed consciousness in the individual which will subsequently influence their lifestyle, while providing forms of community development that are required by local communities.

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2001

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many people for the help I have received in the preparation and research presented in this book.

Thanks firstly to Elery Hamilton-Smith for providing inspiration over many years and acting as a mentor.

The people of Santa Elena for allowing myself and Youth Challenge International to become a part of their community and work with them in developing the Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve.

The participants – ‘Challengers’ – involved in the Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve and particularly the Australians who participated in the research, with special thanks to Libby Larson. The Youth Challenge staff – Mark Ely, Mark Darby, Chris Klar particularly for their inspired efforts over the years and to all those involved in Youth Challenge Australia and International for your energy and enthusiasm (you know who you are).

A special thanks to John Neil and Mark Jackson who has been involved in proofing, editing and critiquing. The faults in the final presentation are mine. Also to my mother, Betsy, co-author of so many papers who has developed my thinking and spirit to allow me to undertake this type of work.

Lastly, my wife, Julie, son Jamie and daughter Melanie for allowing me the time to volunteer. My family, parents Betsy and Les, sisters Jenny, Sue, Christine and brother Michael: you are all inspirations to me in so many ways, and thanks also to Megan and Gareth for putting up with our family.

Stephen Wearing

Chapter 1

Introduction

Experiences that Make a Difference

Contemporary volunteer tourism has tended to suffer from a lack of differentiation from other forms of tourism or volunteering. Instead it has been the subject of selective pragmatism rather than a specific definition or method, falling into areas such as alternative tourism, international volunteering, social work and conservation corps work. Its treatment in this book desires to provide it with a more substantive boundary and recognition of its more specific identity. So what is volunteer tourism? The generic term 'volunteer tourism' applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment.

Some empirical examples of volunteer tourist operations are those offered by organizations such as Youth Challenge International, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Earthwatch, to name a few. These operations and their projects obviously vary in location, size, participant characteristics and organizational purpose. The common element in these operations, however, is that the participants can be viewed largely as volunteer tourists. That is, they are seeking a tourist experience that is mutually beneficial, that will contribute not only to their personal development but also positively and directly to the social, natural and/or economic environments in which they participate. The philosophy of Explorations in Travel, a US-based volunteer work-placement firm provides a good insight:

Travelling is a way to discover new things about ourselves and learn to see ourselves more clearly. Volunteering abroad is a way to spend time within another culture, to become part of new community, to experience

life from a different perspective . . . Every community needs people willing to volunteer their time, energy and money to projects that will improve the living conditions for its inhabitants. No one needs to travel around the world to find a good and worthy cause to dedicate their efforts to. Volunteering should be something we do as a regular part of our lives, not just when we can take a month or two off, or when we have extra money to spend on travel. Your actions are your voice in the world, saying loudly and clearly what you think is important, what you believe to be right, what you support.

Furthermore, the position of the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) also emphasizes this point in an environmental conservation context:

Voluntary and community action can support site and species surveys, practical conservation projects, and longer term care and management. In the course of giving their time, energy, and experience to improving biodiversity, people can gain social and economic benefits including understanding, knowledge and skills. All of this can then further enhance their voluntary commitment.

(BTCV, 2000, p. 1)

Volunteer tourism can take place in varied locations such as rainforests and cloudforests, biological reserves and conservation areas. Popular locations include countries in Africa, Central and South America. Activities can vary across many areas, such as scientific research (wildlife, land and water), conservation projects, medical assistance, economic and social development (including agriculture, construction and education) and cultural restoration. Indeed, volunteers can find themselves anywhere between assisting with mass eye surgery operations to constructing a rainforest reserve. There is usually, however, the opportunity for volunteers to take part in local activities and interact further with the community. Hence the volunteer tourist contribution is bilateral, in that the most important development that may occur in the volunteer tourist experience is that of a personal nature, that of a greater awareness of self: 'When volunteers come back, they feel empowered, knowing they have been able to make a difference . . . You come home feeling you don't have limits. You feel a lot more confident in your ideas and beliefs and that you can contribute to society' (Hill, 2001, p. 28).

Of interest, however, is that volunteer tourists will almost always pay in some way to participate in these activities. Furthermore, the amount is usually more than an average tourist would expect to pay on a 'normal' holiday to a similar location. While there are some sponsorship programmes and alternative contribution arrangements provided by some organizations, the financial contribution required of the volunteer tourist is illustrative of the wider nature of the experience; of greater benefits for host and tourist alike. It is this, and

other key aspects of volunteer tourism that will be explored in this book.

While multidisciplinary in approach, and drawing heavily on broader tourism literature, a largely sociological perspective has been taken in this book. In doing so, it is sought to demonstrate that in the case of volunteer tourism each individual will construct the meaning of their experience according to their own cultural and social background, the purpose of the visit, their companions, preconceived and observed values of the host culture, the marketing images of the destination and, above all, the relationships of power between visitor and host cultures, as well as within the host culture.

As part of the volunteer tourism experience, interactions occur and the self is enlarged or expanded, challenged, renewed or reinforced. As such, the experience becomes an ongoing process which extends far beyond the actual tourist visit. Rojek (1993, p. 114) claims 'travel, it was thought, led to the accumulation of experience and wisdom. One began with nothing, but through guidance, diligence and commonsense one gained knowledge and achieved self-realisation.' Furthering this, volunteer tourism provides an opportunity for an individual to engage in an altruistic attempt to explore 'self'. It 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.

Still, the broader tourism literature suggests that holidays do not usually have a tremendous impact on the way in which an individual sees him/herself (Kottler, 1997, p. 103). It has been contended that holidays serve as an escape from the constraints and stresses of everyday life (Burkart and Medlik, 1974, p. 56; Cohen and Taylor, 1976; Rojek, 1995), or perhaps as a reward for hard work, but do not ultimately alter a person's everyday life in terms of the way they think, feel or act. The traditional tourism literature suggests that while the individuals may have enjoyed themselves, it is not long before that holiday is a memory in the day-to-day life that they return to. This book seeks to explore a different approach: taking volunteer tourism and investigating the more significant impacts it can have on the individual and on their lifestyle.

While much has been written in relation to the motivations of tourists when engaging in tourism,¹ little research has been presented concerning the impact that leisure experiences such as volunteer tourism may have on the development of self through travel. As such,

¹ See for example Gray's wanderlust/sunlust theory (Mathieson and Wall, 1982), Ross' consideration of pull/push determinants (1994, p. 21) or even Plog's (1991) analysis of allocentric and psychocentric personalities in dictating travel behaviour.

this book uses vocabularies of motive through the personal accounts of volunteer tourists to examine this complex notion of volunteer tourism.

In examining volunteer tourists, we will see how they make a difference not only in the places they interact with, but also within themselves.

Historical Context of Alternative Tourism

Historically, the prohibitive costs, transport difficulties and perceived dangers prevented many from experiencing other countries and cultures outside their own. From the early stages of history, as far back as 1244 BC, to arguably the 18th century, leisure travel has largely been the province of the privileged. In the Middle Ages for example, a time of mass Christian pilgrimages, 'travel was still generally considered to be a dangerous and uncomfortable experience that was best avoided if at all possible' (Weaver and Opperman, 2000, p. 61).

It was the phenomenon of the 'Grand Tour', which became popular in the 16th century, that best represents the initial developments of international tourism. Aristocratic young men from 'the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe undertook extended trips to continental Europe for educational and cultural purposes' (Weaver and Opperman, 2000, p. 61). High social value was placed on these expeditions; however, it was here that travel motives began to shift. Travelling for education and social status slowly gave way to travelling for pleasure and sightseeing. The industrial revolution, beginning in the 1700s, saw a growing need for recreation opportunities and, subsequently, transport systems to allow them to occur. Following the introduction of improvements in transport such as railroads, sealed roads and even ocean liners, the nature of travel began to change rapidly. Notably, the widespread application of air travel for leisure purposes and the growing economies of scale meant that travel soon became a commodity to be sold to a growing number of potential tourists. As Hall (1995, p. 38) observes:

Mass tourism is generally acknowledged to have commenced on the 5 July 1841, when the first conducted excursion train of Thomas Cook left Leicester station in northern Britain. Since that time tourism has developed from the almost exclusive domain of the aristocracy to an experience that is enjoyed by tens of millions worldwide.

As tourism advanced into the 19th century, it became more and more insulated from the real world. In opposition to its origins where travellers sought the unknown, tourism was fast becoming a home away from home where participants no longer had to expose themselves to the dangers of having to meet and associate with the host

community as they were now able to 'gaze' (Urry, 1990, p. 135) from the safety and comfort of coaches, trains and hotel rooms without actually involving themselves in any way. Group sizes and frequency of excursions increased, thus giving way to the term 'mass tourism'.

The massive growth of international tourism is evident in figures such as worldwide international arrivals, which have increased from 25,282,000 in 1950 to 625 million in 1998 (WTO, 1999). Tourism is said to be the world's largest group of industries (Boer, 1993), with international tourism receipts rising 2% in 1998 to reach a level of US \$445 billion (WTO, 1999). The tourism industry employs around 200 million people worldwide, accounting in 1999 for over 11% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) (WTTC, 1999). It has been argued that this recent proliferation is a result of increases in leisure time, disposable income, mobility, demographic changes and technological improvements in communication technologies (Young, 1992).

In accounting for tourism as a global phenomenon, much of the initial sociological work was concerned with the individual tourist and the part that holidays play in establishing identity and a sense of self. This self was posited predominantly as universal, and tourism, like leisure, was seen in an opposing relationship with the 'workaday world'. Cohen and Taylor (1976), for example, drew on Goffman's (1974) concern with the presentation of self in everyday life, to argue that holidays are culturally sanctioned escape routes for western travellers. One of the problems for the modern traveller, in this view, is to establish identity and a sense of personal individuality in the face of the morally void forces of a technological world. Holidays provide a free area, a mental and physical escape from the immediacy of the multiplicity of impinging pressures in technological society. Thus, holidays provide scope for the nurture and cultivation of human identity; as Cohen and Taylor argue, overseas holidays are structurally similar to leisure because one of their chief purposes is identity establishment and the cultivation of one's self-consciousness. The tourist, they claim, uses all aspects of the holiday for the manipulation of well-being.

However, in the tourist literature, these arguments became diverted into a debate about the authenticity or otherwise of this experience (see MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988), serving to focus attention on the attractions of the tourist destination. Such a shift objectified the destination as place – a specific geographical site was presented to the tourist for their gaze (Urry, 1990). Thus the manner of presentation became all important and its authenticity or otherwise the focus of analysis: 'I categorised objects of the gaze in terms of romantic/collective, historical/modern, and authentic/unauthentic', says Urry (1990, p. 135). The tourist themselves became synonymous with the Baudelarian *flâneur* (French for 'gazer': 'the strolling *flâneur* was a forerunner of the 20th century tourist'; Urry, 1990, p. 138). This *flâneur*

was generally perceived as escaping from the workaday world for an 'ephemeral', 'fugitive' and 'contingent' leisure experience (see Rojek, 1993, p. 216).

Similar to the way in which this type of 'flaneurism' (Urry, 1990, p. 138) characterized tourism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alternative tourism has characterized the latter part of the 20th century. Tourists began searching for new and exciting forms of travel in defiance of the mass-produced tourism product born out of the industrial revolution and, prior to that, the need for social standing (Hall, 1995; Weaver and Opperman, 2000). Backpacking, adventure tourism and ecotourism are some of the types of alternative tourism that emerged during this time and have since confirmed, via their popularity, their place as targeted market segments. Niche markets were developed that allowed the tourist to choose the holiday they felt best suited their needs and wants, while, at the same time, maintaining an appropriate level of social status among their peers.

But how significant are these alternative tourist markets? To begin with one of the most popular markets, ecotourism, The International Ecotourism Society admit that while their ecotourism 'definition has been widely accepted . . . [it] does not serve as a functional definition for gathering statistics. No global initiative presently exists for the gathering of ecotourism data. Ecotourism should be considered a specialty segment of the larger nature tourism market' (The International Ecotourism Society, 2001, p. 1). Indeed, other 'alternative' niche markets also suffer from the same data collection shortcomings on an international and national level. While a supply-side attempt to measure the volunteer tourist market could prove useful, it would be likely to face definitional, temporal and geographical limitations.

Still, alternative tourism is now being seriously considered as a significant area of tourism experience (Holden, 1984; Cohen, 1987, 1995; Vir Singh *et al.*, 1989; Pleumarom, 1990; Smith and Eadington, 1992; Weiler and Hall, 1992). However, a number of authors (Butler, 1992; Cohen, 1995) have attempted to incorporate it into the analysis of 'mass tourism', thus subordinating it to mainstream tourism research. Questions thus arise as to the feasibility of alternative tourism being analysed in terms of a separate construct or different paradigm. This has been a problem historically within new and emergent areas of research, as explained in the case of feminist research by Stanley and Wise (1984).

The popularity of specific forms of alternative tourism, such as ecotourism² (a relatively new term in the world's vocabulary) and now

² Boo (1990, p. 10) provides the most cited definition to date: 'We may define ecological tourism or ecotourism as that tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying

volunteer tourism (coined 'voluntourism' at a recent conference), has increased significantly. Ecotourism itself has, in recent years, been the subject of a great deal of discussion. This was highlighted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. The conference brought together heads of state and government representatives from 120 nations and delegates from 178 countries looking for 'win-win' policies in relation to human interaction with the environment (World Bank, 1992, p. 8), and a significant number of papers addressed the issues surrounding ecotourism.

The question of sustainability – and, by implication, sustainable development – in relation to alternative forms of tourism experiences has become central in the analysis and provision of these types of experiences. The *World Conservation Strategy* initially posited sustainability as an underlying premise for a large number of projects based in developing countries, and *Our Common Future* (widely known as the Brundtland Report) attempted to give it an operational context (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; de La Court, 1990; Farrell and Runyan, 1991; Hare, 1991) which enabled agencies to engender it into their operating philosophies.

The provision of alternative tourism experiences – such as ecotourism and volunteer tourism – are fundamentally aligned to sustainability in attempting to ensure that the resource and destination impacts are minimized. Environmental factors such as the host community (the community associated with the destination area), biodiversity and avoiding irreversible environmental change are emphasized in the literature on sustainability (e.g. World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; Cronin, 1990; Ecologically Sustainable Development Working Groups, 1991; Sofield, 1991). As a result of these factors, volunteer tourism recently has arisen as a phenomenon in the realm of alternative tourist experiences. However, as yet, the current body of tourism literature has neglected this growing area of the tourism phenomenon.

The significance of alternative tourism for this book is premised on the idea that an understanding is needed of its role and function in the everyday interactions as they occur in the process of the tourist

the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas. Ecological tourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach, although an ecological tourist is not required to be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person that practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences . . .'. As there is no strict consensus on a specific definition of ecotourism (as will be discussed in Chapter 2), numerous examples abound. The Ecotourism Society (1992) in the USA defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel that conserves natural environments and sustains the well-being of local people'.

experience. Alternative tourism is explored in relation to individual utilization of tourism experiences in the negotiation and definition/redefinition of a sense of self and identity, contributing to a development of the process whereby specific social meanings are created, communicated and interpreted both spatially and temporally. The in-depth analysis of one particular project enables the ideas inherent in volunteer tourism, and what it might contribute to both tourism theory and practice, to be brought to life. The book contributes to the development of the research area of volunteer tourism by focusing upon the experiences of participants in a community-based project – the Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve (SERR).

The focus of the research on experience is contextualized within a framework stemming from the literature on tourism and leisure experiences. The experiential focus allows for the analysis of the volunteer tourism experience as a participative process involving direct interaction with the natural environment/local community within a specific social situation, contextualized by the differential elements of ecotourism, volunteering and serious leisure. This provides the initial basis for the exploration of alternative tourist experiences.

Selves in the Tourism Experience

To date, sociologies of tourism have developed two major themes concerning the self of the traveller. On the one hand, there has been an emphasis on tourism as a means of escape from the everyday, even if such escape is temporary. On the other, travel has been constructed as a means of self-development, a way to broaden the mind, experience the new and different and to come away in some way enriched. Both involve the self of the tourist. One adopts a pessimistic view, suggesting there is no escape (e.g. Cohen and Taylor, 1976; Rojek, 1993) and the other moves to an optimistic outlook in which everyone will benefit from the tourist experience (e.g. Pearce, 1984; Brown, 1992). Others, such as MacCannell (1992) attempt to balance the two views. MacCannell, for example, sees the touristic movement of peoples both to and from the western world as an opportunity to form hybrid cultures, a pre-condition for inventing and creating subjectivities that resist cultural constraints. He claims that the neo-nomads of tourism in the post-modern era cross cultural boundaries not as invaders, but as imaginative travellers who benefit from displaced self-understanding and the freedom to go beyond the limits that frontiers present. The 'true heroes' of tourism, he claims, are those who know that 'their future will be made of dialogue with their fellow travellers and those they meet along the way' (1992, p. 4). On the other hand, he debunks the traveller who seeks escape through tourism while demanding the comforts of

home, at an exaggerated and luxurious level. 'This', he says, 'is an overturned nomadic consciousness in which the ultimate goal of travel is to set up sedentary housekeeping in the entire world, to displace the local peoples, or at least to subordinate them in the enterprise, to make them the 'household' staff of global capitalists' (MacCannell, 1992, p. 5). This form of ingesting the 'other' into the self – and subsequently eliminating it – is termed contemporary cannibalism: where the tourist consumes and destroys the culture of the host peoples in developing countries. Far from enlarging the self, he sees this form of tourism as supplying the energy for 'autoeroticism, narcissism, economic conservatism, egoism, and absolute group unity or fascism' (1992, p. 66). The tourist self, in this view, remains rigid or static and turned in on her/himself – shrinking, rather than expanding, or, in Craib's terms (1998), closing down psychic space where the self of the host person is devalued and diminished.

This book seeks to pursue another direction. Building on Kelly's (1996, p. 45) work on leisure, where he proclaims that 'this relative freedom makes possible the investment of self that leads to the fullest development of ourselves, the richest expression of who we want to become, and the deepest experience of fulfilment', the volunteer tourist seeks to discover the type of life experiences that best suits their needs. In undertaking this, they launch themselves into a journey of personal discovery. The volunteer tourist experience offers an opportunity to examine the potential of travel to change self, in the belief that these experiences would be of a more permanent nature than the average guided, packaged holiday that lasts 2 or 3 weeks (Kottler, 1997, p. 103). Craik (1986) and Cohen (1987) have given mention to the phrase 'modern day pilgrims' which propounds the idea that during the process of searching for something else, one may be better able to identify with self. The reasons for this could relate to the fact that as a result of travelling for a longer period of time, people come out of holiday mode and begin to accept things as being normal and respond accordingly (Hansel, 1993, p. 97). As the volunteer tourist learns and interacts more with the people and the culture of the place in which they are living, the surrounding environment becomes more familiar, and so they naturally absorb, integrate and adopt elements of that environment. Being able to accept and deal with one's environment is an important element in the development of self and it can be through volunteer tourism experiences that an individual must learn to rely on him or herself.

Seeking out the new and unfamiliar and going beyond our daily concept of self is an essential step in the development of self. Such 'rites of passage' (Withey, 1997, p. 3) see that each individual is tested through arduous and sometimes painful ordeals (Craik, 1986, p. 24). Tourism can be considered an excellent example of such a test, as many situations encountered whilst embarking on touristic activities can be

fraught with problems – problems often born out of ignorance for one's surroundings. However, a number of tourists 'actually pay to be put in uncomfortable and dangerous situations' (Craik, 1986, p. 25) so that they can feel a sense of achievement and reward once it is over.

Despite such suggestions, volunteer tourist experiences do not necessarily have to be dangerous in order for an individual to benefit from them. Darby (1994) and Wearing (1998) both suggest that an examination of travel experiences such as volunteer tourism endured by people during the stage of late adolescence can provide a clearer understanding of how an individual goes about developing their sense of self. A common element of late adolescence seems to be that each person needs to feel independent and to be able to handle any difficulties that they encounter without the aid of others. As Darby (1994, p. 131) has suggested in relation to Youth Challenge International volunteer tourist participants: 'breaking away from previous social groups and perceptions . . . gave the participants a chance to review their self; their relation to other people; and their goals and aspirations for the future'. Therefore, it may be argued that separation from 'the familiar' can provide an excellent opportunity for an individual to seek new challenges and expand or reconfirm their identity.

Evidence from international volunteer tourist operations (see Darby, 1994; Wearing, 1998) and other volunteer agencies suggests that a high percentage of participants are between the ages of 18 and 25 years. This experience of being away from their familiar culture is imperative in the sense that they are able to begin focusing on what they, as individuals, desire in their lives independently of their peers and parents or other reference groups (Hattie, 1992, p. 18). Hewitt (1979, p. 74) maintains that each person is assigned a character both by others and by themselves (whereby they are expected to act in a particular way in all circumstances). However, they may feel trapped or stifled by the boundaries of this character and be forced to seek out a new environment. Iso-Ahola (1994, p. 53) makes a valid point:

Given the essence of perceived freedom to leisure and the positive relationship between perceived freedom and perceived control, much of leisure has to do with exercise of personal control over one's behaviour and environment . . . leisure develops self-determination personality and thereby helps buffer against stressful life events.

This freedom and resulting self-determination (Iso-Ahola, 1994, p. 53) may have the effect of providing an individual with the opportunity to develop their sense of self. Through being largely in control, not feeling pressured to act in any specific manner, taking 'time out' from normal daily life and adopting different roles, volunteer tourists may become more aware of what they are seeking and be better equipped to deal with the challenges faced in their 'real' lives (Kottler, 1997, p. 29).

Examinations of prior practices in the field of tourism reinforce the belief that tourism does, in fact, improve the mind and overall character of its participants. Tourism, as it is known today, has been suggested by Craik (1986, p. 30) to include certain elements of pilgrimage. This statement implies that through the travel experience, a person can hope to discover things about the world around them and their particular place within it. Through the self-testing element of tourism, a person gains knowledge and confidence about themselves, their abilities/limitations (Darby, 1994) and possibly an insight into the direction that they feel their life should take.

Analyses of tourist destinations as image in tourist advertising and tourist research (Dilley, 1986; Telisman-Kosuta, 1989; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Cohen, 1995; Bramwell and Rawding, 1996) assumes that each individual's experience of the tourist destination will be similar. There is, however, a significant body of research that indicates that such a conceptualization is, in fact, counterproductive (Rowe and Stevenson, 1994; Dann, 1995). Thus, this book seeks to explore the possibility of a more useful conceptualization of the tourist: that is, as someone who is influenced by the subjective meanings through which they are affected, constructed in interaction with the space and people that form the destination site. It is the experience of the interaction in this specific space that affects the socially constructed self who travels between specifically bounded spatio-temporal coordinates and this is the core of the volunteer tourist's experience. Therefore, the alternative tourist as a wanderer seeking simply to repudiate established tourism experiences (Cohen, 1995, p. 13) is critiqued as still failing to incorporate or recognize elements that may provide for an understanding of the experience.

Operators, Communities and Volunteer Tourism

The ecotourism literature illustrates that there is a particular focus on communities that are living in marginal or environmentally threatened areas. These communities are encouraged to take an economic interest in the preservation of their natural resources through ecotourism development. One of the ways this can be achieved is by finding assistance through organizations that offer volunteer programmes to work on such projects.

Significantly, it has been claimed that ecotourism – and by default volunteer tourism – is mass tourism in its early pre-tourism development stage. However, if the criteria used to describe the various components of ecotourism are applied to each particular tourism situation, it becomes clearer if the type of tourist activity being undertaken conforms to what Wallace (1992, p. 7) describes as 'real' ecotourism.

Essential to this is a two-way interactive process between host and guest and, therefore, 'the culture of the host society is as much at risk from various forms of tourism as physical environments' (Sofield, 1991, p. 56). From definitions of volunteer tourism and ecotourism, we see a major aim of sustaining the well-being of the local community where tourism takes place. Volunteer tourism can be viewed as a development strategy leading to sustainable development and centring the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitor that all benefit from tourism activity.

One of the key questions this book will address is: can a philosophy and practice of volunteer tourism exist outside the market priorities defined and sustained in the global market place of tourism? The global commodification or commercial globalization of ecotourism, for example, is almost complete in international tourist markets. As Campbell (1983) observes, consumption can become an end in itself. This commodification can be seen in the ambiguity over definition as to what ecotourism is and, as such, the profit objective has perhaps led to ecotourism's misinterpretation by the industry and to the inclusion of a range of unethical products. Butler (1992, p. 1) believes that for this reason a general understanding must be arrived at so that ecotourism is not just defined purely by commercial activity but also by ethics and a coherent philosophy. What volunteer tourism appears able to offer is an alternative direction where profit objects are secondary to a more altruistic desire to travel in order to assist communities.

In examining the role of volunteer tourists, ecotourism operators (giving a context for volunteer tourism operators, i.e. as they have a motive beyond pure profit, sustainability) and local communities, it is hoped that such organizations can become examples for the tourism industry to become more sensitized to the differing needs of local communities, while simultaneously aligning both these groups with national conservation/development strategies. It has been suggested that ecotourism can only operate effectively if it is developed and inter-linked with certain concepts, such as national conservation strategies, designed to demonstrate to sectoral interests how they inter-relate to other sectors. This thereby reveals new opportunities for conservation and development to work together (McNeely and Thorsell, 1989). These different sectors include governments, private enterprise, local communities and organizations, conservation non-governmental organizations and international institutions.

If each sector has an understanding of where volunteer tourism fits within the broader framework of the tourism and conservation sectors, then there is a better chance of well-designed volunteer programmes. These could, for example, take protected areas as a focus for fostering host community values while providing education for outsiders (Kutay, 1990, p. 38), which would in a way legitimize volunteer

tourism. The ecotourism organizations and their approaches therefore are an essential part of what the volunteer experience is. These organizations need to ensure that their operations have considered the basic principles that underlie ecotourism if they are to fit within the tourism industry.

Generally, ecotour operators need to instil a conservation ethic for environmentally sensitive travel in their clients (Whelan, 1991). By creating appreciation for natural areas and traditional cultures, tour companies can teach their clients to 'tread lightly' when they travel to remote regions. This is also applicable as a guide for volunteer tourism.

By their very nature, ecotourism and volunteer tourism suggest that there is a need for:

- tourism infrastructure that is sensitively developed where the tourism industry accepts integrated planning and regulation;
- supply-led marketing by the tourism industry;
- the establishment of carrying capacities (environmental and cultural) and strict monitoring of these; and
- the environmentally sensitive behaviour and operations of tourists and operators.

It is envisaged that volunteer tourism can operate successfully within this framework.

A wide range of institutions and organizations do, and will continue to, play an important role in providing volunteer tourism experiences. The types of organizations vary considerably and a number provide international support and sponsorship for the implementation of research projects and community development. These organizations facilitate this process through provision of necessary resources that may not otherwise be available. The international scope of these organizations can prove invaluable assistance in terms of their accumulated knowledge and experience. These types of organizations provide a large number of recruits through volunteer tourism with free time and money to spend on sustainable development efforts (Whelan, 1991). As such, they need access to relevant educational information before, during and after their experience. This will ensure maximization of their experience both on site and back in their own community.

Lea (1993, p. 702) suggests that there is clear evidence that highly commodified tourism is leading to unacceptable impacts on social and cultural values in some developing countries. Economics is the focus of the free market economy, whereas communities and the environment are generally the priority of volunteer tourism. The conflict of interests between the two can lead to a mutually exclusive operating environment. Tourism in the free market economy uses and exploits communities and natural resources as a means of profit accumulation and has been described as the commercialization of the human need to

travel. This profits the tourism industry promoters and can lead to the exploitation of host communities, their culture and environment (Lea, 1993, p. 714). A further concern over the impact of tourism on local culture is that organizations operating under the banner of ecotourism and volunteer tourism may need to accept regulations to protect natural environments from the exploitative attitudes of the free market society.

It is conceivable that if volunteer tourism became overly dictated by the market economy and the volunteer tourist was unable to form a link to the destination areas, then it would be unidentifiable within the array of commercially created choices – and its purpose or significance becomes benign. This book seeks to address the idea that volunteer tourism enables the individual to have an experience that incorporates social value into identity and hence links host community and/or nature and self. If the key to a volunteer tourist experience is appreciation and awareness of the local environment (cultural and social), then the danger is that the volunteer tourist just becomes another consumer of a market product and thus eliminates or ‘filters out’ the underlying self–community link in the experience.

Volunteer tourism experiences can be examined differently from other experiences, allowing us to analyse closely the notion of self in tourism. Does it matter if it is just commodified leisure and not differentiated in any way from ordinary tourism? The focus lies in the idea that volunteer experiences cause value and consciousness changes in the individual that subsequently will influence their concept of self. Perhaps the volunteer tourist experience even predicates a change in identity; however, Glasser argues that the pursuit of a desired identity is often channelled into consumerism through the promulgation in modern complex societies of an ideal consumer whose main ‘freely chosen’ leisure activity is consumption (Glasser, 1976), i.e. consumption, culture and/or nature meet in volunteer tourism. The volunteer tourist can therefore never achieve what they seek. The experience becomes a tranquillizer rather than an awareness-raising attempt to cancel out the stress of life. The individual is left with an unsatisfactory search for some form of identity and an endless need to follow the latest dictates of big business and tourist markets. Local destination communities are consumed under the guise of a legitimate altruistic activity rather than leading to awareness and appreciation of culture, nature and discovery of the travel–self link.

Campbell (1983) argues (following Weber) that the ‘spirit’ of modern consumerism rests upon an attitude of restless desire and discontent, which produces consumption as an end in itself. Romanticism, he claims, conceived as a ‘cultural movement, which introduced the modern doctrines of self-expression and fulfillment’, is the most likely source of an ethic, which legitimates such a spirit. Thus the ‘romantic ethic’ of the enlightenment provides a contradictory and

compensatory ethic to the self-disciplinary future orientation of the Protestant work ethic, but one which is necessary for perpetual consumption. He does not acknowledge that the two contradictory ethics have been accommodated in contemporary society by separating out the sphere of leisure – with its emphasis on self-expression and fulfilment – from the sphere of work with its self-denying disciplinary ethic.

Volunteer tourism therefore does not legitimize the rights of host communities and their rights outside of the tourism industry as an entity with its own history and sense of place, but rather provides another source of consumption that will only endanger the very communities and environments that the volunteer tourist seeks to protect. Further, the volunteer tourists themselves are complicit in this consumption and commodifying process and are then the economic ‘units’ targeted by the industry.

The Santa Elena Experience

The Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve (SERR) project,³ established in a rural community of 800 people in Costa Rica, Central America, provides the focus for the analysis of volunteer tourism as a subset of alternative tourism experiences.

Tourism is generally recognized as an important contributor to sustainable development for Costa Rica, in offering a much needed alternative source of economic return whilst providing a stimulus for conserving natural resources. Costa Rica’s diverse topography and climate support a wide variety of plant and animal life that continue to attract visitors.

The presence of international research organizations (such as Earthwatch and WWF) has played a large role in encouraging scientists and students to study the unique natural heritage offered in the area. Research, the media and publications have promoted widespread interest in Costa Rica as a destination for nature lovers, whether involved in scientific research or not.⁴

³ The tourism experience examined in this book is based on the development of an ecotourism rainforest reserve in Costa Rica. The author initially completed a feasibility study for the project, later becoming a project manager in the facilitation of what is now known as the Santa Elena Rainforest Reserve (SERR). This involvement consisted of obtaining additional land for the reserve, design and construction of an interpretation centre and trails, establishing a tour-guide training course, various aspects of project management and, finally, the facilitation of the community management plan.

⁴ Rovinski (1991) highlights the importance that science-based tourism has played in the development of more broad-based ecotourism. Additionally, the Office of National Tourism (1996) highlights the success of encouraging and educating visitors to treat the environment with care and respect and how this can increase visitor experience, satisfaction and interest.

Authors such as Lea (1993, 1995) and Boo (1990, p. 11) identify a number of economic benefits that can accrue from tourism. Tourism can increase a country's foreign exchange earnings and thereby improve the balance of payments, whilst its place as part of the expanding service sector can generate employment. Ecotourism in particular is often promoted for its ability to create investment for infrastructure development, contributing to the diversification of the economy in ameliorating the reliance on a small export base and assisting in stimulating the economic activity and growth in isolated areas. Within rural communities, ecotourism is seen as providing an economic alternative to traditional land uses such as agriculture, and may, in cases such as the SERR, slow down deforestation (see Boo, 1990, p. 17). Valentine (1987, p. 17) indicates that capital investments and operational expenditure can be multiplied throughout the economy because of the 'trickle down effect' or multiplier. In addition to this, the visitor expenditure within rural communities provides valuable direct income. This would indicate that there is significant scope for rural communities such as Santa Elena to benefit from projects like the SERR project that rely on volunteer tourism in their establishment and an ongoing commitment from volunteers to continue running.

Monteverde forest is at the peak of the Tilaran Mountain Range in Costa Rica, which forms the continental divide between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. Dairy farming was the foundation of the region's economy and the new settlers arriving from other regions of Costa Rica in search of land (Boo, 1990) founded Santa Elena 6 km north-west of Monteverde. The new settlers produced milk for sale to the 'Friends' cheese factory, and the early cheese production was around 10 kg per day. Today, Monteverde's modern cheese factory produces about 100 kg of cheese daily and it is sold throughout Costa Rica (Rachowiecki, 1991).

The initial land set aside in the area for conservation was formally named the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve (MCFP). The Tropical Science Centre of San Jose (a Costa Rican non-profit organization founded in 1962) has owned and managed the reserve since its inception in 1971 and, together with the Monteverde Conservation League (MCL) which was formed in 1989, has successfully brought about the expansion of the preserve to 10,000 ha (Tobias, 1989).

The MCFP is the habitat for more than 2000 species of plants, 106 species of mammals, 336 species of birds (with 40% being rare species) and 123 species of reptiles and amphibians (Boo, 1990). Scientists came in growing numbers to this area, and increasing numbers of visitors, drawn in large part by the accounts of these scientists, were attracted to the reserve (Boo, 1990). Subsequently, tourism to the MCFP has increased from approximately 300 in 1973 to 40,000 in 1992. Unfortunately, the increased tourism to the

Monteverde area has bestowed very few benefits upon the adjacent Santa Elena community.

In 1990, the community and high school saw the potential of tourism and initiated an ecotourism project on the 'high school farm'.⁵ This led to a general goal to rebuild the local community's economy and provide employment for local high school students. The SERR is now owned and operated by the high school through its Board of Directors. The school currently is changing its curriculum from an agricultural base to one based on ecology, English language, hospitality, and arts and crafts.

Funds for the SERR were raised from the local community, Canadian high schools, private and public sector sponsors and international development organizations. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Youth Challenge International (YCI) initially provided the material, equipment, and staff necessary to develop and construct an interpretation centre and trails. The local and regional government authorities cooperated by directing national government funds into the building of an all-weather road to the reserve (access to which previously was restricted due to high rainfall, clay soils and severe erosion in some sections).

The SERR was opened to visitors after construction of the interpretation centre, and trails were completed in 1992. The SERR project seeks to capitalize on the increase in tourism to protected areas renowned for their outstanding beauty and extraordinary ecological interest. It works on the premise that ecotourism can only survive and prosper if natural areas themselves survive and prosper. The project relied heavily on the interest of developed countries in the natural environment, as these countries provided much needed funds and support, and which may, in the future, provide a significant visitor base for the SERR.

The SERR project was designed and implemented specifically with an adherence to the principles of ecotourism and, as such, ecotourism itself is a fundamental element of the project. Previous studies of recreationalists (and tourists) in protected areas (such as national parks) often acknowledge, or on analysis suggest, that complete theoretical explanations of leisure (and by definition tourist) experiences are lacking (see McCool *et al.*, 1984; Manning, 1986; Colton, 1987;

⁵ The Santa Elena High School (or Agricultural College) was established in 1977. Architecturally it is a part of the primary school but it added 4 years to the existing schooling in the area, allowing students to go on to study up to 16 years of age. In 1983, the government presented the school with a 10-year lease on a parcel of land on which students could conduct agricultural projects. The project was seen as a sound initiative but, later, due to the difficulties of clearing the forest and because of the severe climate, infertile soils and lack of resources, the project was abandoned.

Lucas and Stankey, 1988; Kelly, 1991). Both the general literature on the sociology of tourism experience (as discussed earlier) and the more specific literature in the social sciences on experience and natural environments suggest a need to re-examine the influences of elements of the natural environment experience.

Fundamental to ecotourism, as an element of alternative tourism experience, is the host community and its relationship with tourists. The host community as defined in this context is the community that has a direct affiliation to the natural environment visited by the tourist. Commonly this community would provide support services for the tourist and have some involvement in the management of these natural environments. However, Butler (1980, 1991) has found that there is generally an inevitable decline of the host community's sustainability and this is directly related to the host community's role as part of the tourism product. According to Murphy (1985, 1988), the success of the tourism industry depends upon the acceptance and support of the host community. Therefore, in the exploration of the differential elements of the tourism experience, it is essential to ensure the inclusion of the natural and cultural environments of the destination area.

Set against this background are the experiences of several volunteer tourists as part of a YCI project in the SERR. Their efforts and experiences are analysed to provide us with an empirical view of what volunteer tourists actually do, experience and come away with.

A New Approach

In placing the concept of alternative tourism in an experiential and historical context, the scene is now set to begin exploring and examining volunteer tourism and the volunteer tourist experience.

Chapter 2 examines alternative tourism experiences and how tourists themselves construct them, then contextualizes the concept of volunteer tourism within those boundaries of alternative tourism and, subsequently, mass tourism. In exploring alternative tourism experiences within the context of wider discussions about culture and society, it is proposed that alternative tourism experiences can best be clarified by the particularity of the specific tourist experience.

The dominant questions that arise with regard to volunteer tourism relate to the relationship between alternative tourism types and the tourism industry as a whole, i.e. the specificity of an experience which relates to the utilization of 'alternative tourism' as a label – such as ecotourism or volunteer tourism – in the marketing of conventional tourism ventures. This debate is explored at this point in an attempt to clarify the position for providers of alternative tourism experiences and their relationship to the tourism industry. Much of the work on

touristic experience has been focused on producers (the industry) rather than on consumers (tourists), and little empiric research has considered the tourist with a focus on the symbolic meanings and values they associate with their activities (see Squire, 1994).

YCI is discussed to illustrate volunteer tourism empirically. YCI is examined to move towards a comprehensive theoretical analysis of volunteering as a form of tourism experience. A discussion is presented of the three elements considered important to this type of tourism, that of ecotourism, volunteerism and serious leisure.

Chapter 3 examines one of the 60 environmental projects undertaken by YCI between 1991 and 1995, which provides a microsocial context for the examination of the SERR experience of YCI participants. This chapter contextualizes the SERR project undertaken by YCI in Costa Rica, focusing particularly on the project and its context in Costa Rica and the Santa Elena community, and as a community-based ecotourism project.

The insights from 100 interviews conducted with the actual Santa Elena community are presented in providing for the specific social context for the on-site SERR experience. Given that this book examines the effects that the site (community/natural area/group/project) has on the alternative tourist experience, it is considered important to have an understanding of the community and its general attitudes towards tourism in order to contextualize the comprehensive scope of the analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the data obtained from the in-depth interviews with the participants from Australia, over the 3 years of the Costa Rica project. Each participant was in Costa Rica for 3 months; they spent between 2 and 6 weeks on individual projects such as the SERR project. It provides information from the participants' 'stories' on the SERR experience and analyses the participant's views of their experience by reviewing their recollection of the experience.

Chapter 5 examines the elements of ecotourism, volunteerism and serious leisure in conjunction with the themes that emerged from the participant's definitions of the experience and links them to related information in the interviews and the literature. An overall picture of the experience that participants have had with YCI on the SERR project is presented.

Chapter 6 is focused on the centrality of the natural environment. The site is examined to explore what other elements may have affected the participant's sense of self and identity, ultimately presenting an overall picture of the symbolic influences of elements of the site on their sense of self and identity.

Chapter 7 explores how volunteer tourism experiences actually contribute to the development of self, framing the experience in the very words of the participants. This attempts to satisfy one of the underlying aims of this book: the movement towards social analyses

that will provide a better understanding of alternative tourism experiences. The SERR project was able to provide crucial information about the social construction of such experiences in assisting in the development of social theory that will provide an understanding of the key elements of the experience. The development of theory in this area may initiate and enable a sounder basis in establishing tourism in developing and developed countries at both the individual and community level.

Chapter 8 examines the growing convergence of aims between local communities and the tourism sector. If tourism is developed and managed carefully with involvement from the host communities, it can assist in efforts to maintain and enhance environments. This in turn means not only presenting the natural environment and community heritage, but also providing demonstrable support to the maintenance of that heritage.

Chapter 9 argues that the alternative tourism experience should not be reduced, as MacCannell (1992, p. 6) suggests, to a dialogic model of impossible realities related to dialectal materialism. Instead, its understanding should be grounded in human interactions and the concrete social reality in which it takes place. The SERR project site, in this respect, provides a means of representing and examining the 'empty meeting ground' that MacCannell (1992) posits.

The recognition that the alternative tourist experience is fundamentally based on the interactive elements of the space visited provides the possibility for a comprehensive and contextually holistic understanding. Such an approach enables the elaboration of the potentiality inherent in the on-site interactions and their importance to tourism in the development of strategies for the provision, and understanding of, tourism experiences that move beyond discussions of the 'authentic', 'objects of the gaze' or places of escape (see MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1993).

The volunteer tourism site is a means of examining the empty meeting ground that MacCannell (1992) presents. He sees that 'the one path that still leads in the direction of scholarly objectivity, detachment, and neutrality is exactly the one originally thought to lead away from these classic virtues. That is, an openly autobiographical style in which the subjective position of the author, especially on political matters is presented in a clear and straightforward fashion. At least this enables the reader to review his or her own position to make adjustments necessary for dialogue' (1992, p. 10). The book process has seen many of those adjustments occur as the author has struggled with providing a picture of the alternative tourism experience that is not obscured by the author's interpretation. The book has proposed that alternative forms of tourism experiences can exist apart from the realm of the mass tourism experiences as proposed by authors on tourism

(MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1993). In doing so, it has provided a model of tourist behaviour that gives perspective to the tourist experience. Such a perspective provides a wider view of this experience. In order to capture the individual tourist's construction of her/his experience, the meanings given and the remembrance of the tourist space, qualitative methods would appear to allow for greater variety of response as well as being able to explore the impacts on the self.

If it is recognized that the alternative tourist experience is based on interactions that people have with elements of the space visited, then this can be invaluable for understanding and therefore providing sustainable tourist experiences. Documentation of the real value of the tourist experience to the tourist could suggest that the industry is not compelled to create an environment artificially and to promise this as an image but focus on the on-site interactions and the importance of them to the tourist and develop strategies around these ideas rather than attempting to create authentic objects to gaze at or places to escape to (see MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1993). This can enable another look at how the industry structures tourism and may provide directions for policy in the future.

What we are beginning to see is a new form of alternative tourism, that of volunteer tourism, where new business structures, new motivations for travelling, new experiences to be had and indeed a new type of tourist are emerging. There is not only a greater consideration for the contribution the volunteer can make to the community in which they take part, but also a much greater awareness of the impact the experience has on the personal development of the participant. It is through the latter that we will uncover the nature of volunteer tourism.