

ABSTRACT

A SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH TO VOLUNTEER TOURISM: THE ROLES OF THE HOST COMMUNITY AND AN ALTERNATIVE BREAK PROGRAM IN ACHIOTE, PANAMA

Using a sustainable livelihoods framework as a conceptual and interpretive lens, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand and explain a long-term, cross-cultural collaborative partnership involved in operationalizing volunteer tourism projects for ecotourism development in rural Panama. There is a call to better represent and understand the roles and perspectives of host communities in order to optimize benefits of volunteer tourism projects in the daily lives of local populations where the projects occur.

This study uses a sustainable livelihoods approach to explore a) livelihood context and trends, b) livelihood resources and volunteer tourism's previous impact on those resources, c) institutional and organizational processes, d) livelihood strategies and volunteer tourism's future impact and potential in the realization of those strategies, and e) sustainable livelihood outcomes. Integrating perspectives of community residents in Achote, Panama and other volunteer tourism stakeholders aids in assessing the extent to which volunteer tourism projects address their livelihoods' sustainability. The key aspect of volunteer tourism in the context of sustainable livelihoods that separates it from other types of tourism is the potential for volunteer tourism to add to and enhance livelihood diversification through project work.

Collaborative processes among stakeholders in volunteer tourism are not well understood (Lamoureux, 2009), particularly regarding perspectives of and by the host community (Sin, 2009, 2010). However, even if local populations are involved in the decision making process, the

planning, project execution, and operational processes involve multi-scale, cross-cultural engagement of various stakeholders. Stakeholders include residents of the host community, host partner organizations, volunteer tourism sending organizations or operators, leaders or staff for the sending organizations on the ground, the volunteer tourists themselves, among others. In this study, I examine the collaborative processes among residents of a rural Panamanian community, a locally-based ecotourism group, a Panamanian non-governmental organization, a university Alternative Break Program in the United States, and faculty and student leaders of the groups. A further goal was to explore the interrelationship between volunteer tourism and sustainable livelihoods by providing context and voice to the diverse perspectives in the partnership about how volunteer tourism affects the sustainable livelihoods of the host community.

By exploring existing issues in volunteer tourism and giving voices to each part of the partnership, this study aims to provide insight to the stakeholders' dialogue to better identify, implement, and manage projects that maximize benefits of volunteer projects in host communities. When I began this study, I set out to better understand volunteer tourism in the context of a sustainable livelihood approach and its associated cross-cultural collaborative processes. What I found was a region of the world with great respect for themselves, each other, and their land and in the face of potential massive livelihood change and infrastructure development. By presenting the story of this research using narrative writing, I strive to provide a voice and bring attention to a changing rural Panamanian culture.

This research fills a theoretical and practical gap in volunteer tourism. The sustainable livelihoods approach helps understand how volunteer tourism can complement local livelihoods and integrated into the greater processes of the community. Further, exploration of the institutional collaborative relationships involved in implementing volunteer tourism in a