

## **Measuring Resident Attitudes towards Voluntourism: An Analysis of the Social Exchange Theory (SET)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study is to introduce the concept of “voluntourism” and its applicability as an alternative form of tourism due to its ability to combine recreational activities with service and learning. The location and proximity of a local community to tourism practices affect the way in which the community perceives the effects of voluntourism as a whole, which is why importance is placed on the residents’ perceptions and attitudes towards voluntourism through an analysis incorporating the Social Exchange Theory (SET). This study will focus on the perceptions of residents living on Andaman Island in Thailand, an area that was significantly affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.*

**Keywords:** *tourism, voluntourism, resident attitudes, social exchange theory, Andaman Island, Thailand*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wearing (2001) argues the concept of “volunteering” is founded on notions of altruism and self-development. These notions engage volunteers to work for a cause they believe in and as a result, volunteers feel they have meaningfully spent their time. Volunteer tourism, or “voluntourism,” is a term that “applies to 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” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). Voluntourism is an increasing research topic of interest due to its ability to provide a socio-cultural approach to recreation and community service. Individuals engage in voluntourism due to its ability to combine the best intentions of the not-for-profit sector with the excitement of the tourism sector to create stimulating, service-oriented vacations (Globe Aware, 2010). Current academic research on voluntourism focuses on the motivations and behaviors of “voluntourists” and their experiences. However, existing research on voluntourism has neglected to inquire or consider the host residents’ attitudes toward voluntourism. In this regard, it is important to remember voluntourism is two-fold with host communities playing an essential role.

## **Voluntourism**

Voluntourism is often described as an “alternative” or “new” form of tourism because it provides tourists with an opportunity to combine recreational activities with service and learning (Lee & Woosnam, 2010; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007). As defined by the tourism industry, “voluntourism offers a balanced engagement of volunteering and interaction with a unique destination – its art & culture, geography, history, adventure, and recreation” (VolunTourism International, 2009). Voluntourism is more than just an exchange between tourists and host communities, it is an “opportunity for individuals to exercise cooperative [service], to mature beyond a competitive, non-integral view of humanity, and to embrace the harmony that exists amongst and between [peoples]” (VolunTourism.org, 2010). When “voluntouring,” tourists experience cultural exchanges while engaging in work to help residents (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007); they also gain insight by experiencing and learning about others’ lives and cultures (Lee & Woosnam, 2010).

There are many reasons why individuals choose to engage in voluntourism over traditional tourism. Several authors have focused their research on the experiences of volunteer tourists (Brown & Morrison, 2003; McGehee, 2002; McGehee & Norman, 2002; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Wearing, 2001). Specifically, McGehee and Santos (2005) found the individual participation of the voluntourism experience offers the potential to increase network ties and provide consciousness-raising opportunities. This novel approach to volunteerism also helps ease the channels of direct personal and cultural communication to elicit a mutual understanding between tourists and residents (Wearing, 2001). Although the voluntourism experience from a tourist perspective has been a topic of interest, little research has been done to account for the experiences of the residents of communities who host volunteers (McGehee & Andereck, 2009). Therefore, it is important to encourage additional research to learn how voluntourism affects the attitudes of the “voluntoured.”

## **Resident attitudes**

The location and proximity of a local community to tourism practices affect the way in which the community perceives the effects of voluntourism as a whole. These perceptions are often derived from experiences formed through persuasion, social influence, and attitude changes. Based on the research of McGehee & Andereck (2009), resident attitudes towards volunteerism are derived from the personal benefits received once the service provided by the tourist is complete. The results of the service will yield positive or negative experiences for residents and as a result, newly established attitudes will form the residents’ decision to whether continue support for additional voluntourism activities.

Due to the lack of quantitative data on the subject, McGehee & Andereck (2009, p. 41-2) propose the application of the social exchange theory to measure whether perceived personal benefit will be a strong predictor of support for additional voluntourism activities, and conversely, lack of perceived benefit would predicate lack of support. Ap (1992, p. 668) defines the social exchange theory is “a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation.” This definition suggests individuals are positively disposed toward actions from which they benefit

and can be negatively disposed toward actions from which they incur costs of some kind (McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

The tourism industry in any form consists of exchanges between and among individuals, various stakeholder groups, and organizations—governmental, private, and corporate (McCool & Moisey, 2008, p.246). One could argue that volunteerism is an advantageous form of service for host communities due its dual-mandate to provide a service experience for the volunteers while preserving the dignity and culture of its beneficiaries. Voluntourism also has the possibility to economically contribute to the host region. Nevertheless, there is no current empirical data to support these claims (McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The population sample consists of host community residents on Andaman Island in Thailand, an area that was significantly affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The targeted sample population will consists of 400 residents in those communities that have received some form of voluntourism within the past six years. The questionnaire will be developed on the basis of previous SET studies. However, researchers will adapt current SET methodologies to assess the negative and/or positive perceptions and attitudes of services provided by voluntourism. Once the sample group is determined, mail surveys will be utilized to assess resident perceptions and attitudes of voluntourism in the community. Follow-up postcards will be sent two and four weeks after the first mailing.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Previous tourism research, albeit limited on Andaman Island, Thailand has generally focused on the impacts of the 2004 Tsunami from an economic, social/cultural, and environmental perspective (triple bottom line). This study represents a preliminary shift in the SET paradigm that seeks to go beyond traditional SET measurement by further assessing the positive and/or negative perceptions and attitudes of voluntourism on host community residents. Thus, providing preliminary evidence on whether the host community wants future voluntourism activities to continue on the island. Findings will be analyzed utilizing Frequencies, Percentages, Crosstabs, ANOVA, Factor, Correlation, and Regression analysis.

## **CONCLUSION**

Voluntourism is a unique method of combining travel and service. Voluntourism offers individuals an experience where they can interact with host communities and engage in an exchange of knowledge, culture, and wisdom. There are many benefits for the voluntourist to experience and these have been document in various empirical studies. Nevertheless, the attitudes of residents living in host communities have been neglected. This is unfortunate since these individuals are often the recipients of the service. Therefore, additional research on this issue is necessary and suggested. Findings from this research will offer uniqueness in the current realm of tourism research and volunteerism. In addition, the applicability and use of the social exchange theory to determine the attitudes of residents to volunteerism offers a novel approach

to measure why tourists engage in service opportunities and why some host communities choose to decline the service provided.

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