A Cultural Encounter through Volunteer Tourism: Towards the Ideals of Sustainable Tourism?

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International volunteering is increasingly recognised as a form of alternative tourism. However, the nature of the 'alternative' experience gained, and the ensuing narrative between host and volunteer, remains under-explored in published research, especially in volunteer tourism research within a cultural context in a developed nation. This paper examines the nexus between volunteer tourism and cultural tourism in the search for alternative and sustainable experiences through tourism. Qualitative research using in-depth interviews, diaries and participant observation was conducted to examine the pre-, during and post-trip experiences of 12 Australian visitors undertaking organised volunteer activities in an indigenous Maori community in the North Island of New Zealand during January 2005. Members of the indigenous Maori community were also interviewed to provide an important host perspective. Findings suggest that the nature of the interaction and cultural experiences gained were perceived as mutually beneficial and seemingly different from those gained from traditional cultural products. In particular, the volunteers experienced an alternative Maori cultural product and engaged in a different narrative with their Maori hosts through their volunteer work, one rich in authentic cultural content, genuine and reflective of modern Maori life in New Zealand society.

Introduction

The notion of sustainable tourism is now an established and significant discourse within tourism studies. Early pioneers of the sustainable tourism paradigm in the 1980s advocated the need to change the nature of the traditional host/guest relationship and encouraged the ideals of 'alternative' tourism (see for example, Krippendorf, 1987). Despite the lack of a widely accepted definition of 'alternative tourism', it is generally used to denote a market-differentiated and an ideologically divergent form of tourism that is considered preferable to mass tourism and is more sustainable (Wearing, 2001). For instance, within the discourse on cultural tourism, Richards and Wilson (2006) argue that 'Many consumers, tired of encountering the serial reproduction of culture in different destinations are searching for alternatives'. As such, an increasing number of authors have called for 'alternative' cultural tourism experiences that engender authentic, interactive, more meaningful, individualised and sincere experiential

offerings through tourism (see for example McIntosh, 2004; McIntosh & Bonneman, 2006; Phelps, 2001; Trauer, 2006). The search for these new travel experiences is primarily argued to reflect people's increasing recognition and reaction to the homogenous nature of traditional tourism products as well as their increasing desire for altruism, self-change and an ability to confirm their identities and provide coherence within an uncertain and fragmented postmodern life (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

In New Zealand, there has been a call for the increased development of cultural product based on indigenous Maori culture in an attempt to facilitate economic development for Maori communities. Until recently, much of the consumption of Maori cultural product in New Zealand has been criticised as being centred only on traditional cultural perspectives and leading to predominantly superficial and stereotypical experiences for tourists (McIntosh, 2004). However, in an attempt to meet tourists' demand for more authentic experiences of Maori culture, and in order to preserve Maori cultural identity, Maori communities are now attempting to develop new 'alternative' cultural experiences based on a more engaging, meaningful and sincere interaction between visitors and Maori people (Taylor, 2001). One such example forms the topic of this paper, that of volunteer tourism within an indigenous Maori community.

It has been argued in wider academic discourse that, in the search for alternative models of cultural tourism, many destinations are now using 'creativity' as a development strategy (Prentice & Andersen, 2003; Richards, 2001; Richards & Wilson, 2006). Whereas traditional cultural tourism often implies the commodification and staging of culture for consumption, creative tourism depends on active involvement and reflexive interaction on the part of tourists, something that has not been exposed to the critical scrutiny associated with traditional cultural tourism. Creativity-led development implies that creativity becomes an attribute of both the production and the consumption process, thereby recognising the creative potential of tourists and the subsequent transformation of products into experiences which engage and change the consumer (Pine & Gilmour, 1999). As a process, creativity is seen to create new cultural forms that avoids the 'McGuggenheimisation' of cultural experiences and fosters contemporary attractions based on cultural processes that are seen to meet the needs of tourists for more active, meaningful, enduring and worthwhile experiences (Richards, 2001). These experiences may also foster a more sustainable form of cultural tourism through engendering a new type of relationship between host and guest and one that may closely fit with the ideals promoted by the early pioneers of sustainable tourism. This paper proffers that volunteer tourism provides an example of this alternative form of cultural encounter that has been otherwise overlooked in the literature to date.

Volunteer tourism: An alternative experience through tourism

It has been argued that volunteer tourism is central to a model of alternative tourism (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001, 2002). The concept of 'volunteering' is founded on notions of altruism and self-development, often involving working for a cause that the volunteers believe in so as to feel that they have accomplished

something worthwhile (Sheard, 1992; Wearing, 2001). 'Volunteer tourism' is generally applied to 'those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised 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: 1). Volunteer tourism is seen to foster a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between the host and guest. Thus, it is seen as offering an opportunity for sustainable 'alternative' travel that is more rewarding and meaningful than other holidays and focusses on the altruistic and self-developmental experiences that participants can gain and the assistance that can be delivered to communities in terms of community development, scientific research or ecological/heritage restoration (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2003; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001, 2002, 2004). In this way, Wearing and Neil (2000) describe three aspects of the volunteer tourism experience. Firstly, that the volunteer tourism experience is a personal experience that incorporates the perception that it is chosen for its difference and involves intrinsic motivation. Secondly, that the experience can potentially benefit the participant's life, as well as that of the host community. Thirdly, that meaning is given to the experience through social interaction which may involve a renegotiation of the individual's identity. Volunteer tourism can be part of a short term project or 'gap year' (Simpson, 2004), 'mini-mission' (Brown & Morrison, 2003), participatory environmental research programme (Ellis, 2003), or cultural exchange programme (Lyons, 2003).

Whilst volunteer tourism is inspiring significant discourse in the search for alternative forms of tourism, previous research on volunteer tourism has predominantly profiled volunteer tourists and organisations (Brown & Morrison, 2003; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004), or, motivations and the benefits of the volunteer experience on self and society (Broad, 2003; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; Simpson, 2004; Wearing & Deane, 2003). Although the exact extent to which volunteer tourists make a difference within a community or environment seems to be debatable (see, e.g., Turner *et al.*, 2001), the positive long term effects are being noted (see, e.g., McGehee, 2002). Previous research has also almost exclusively focussed on the nature of volunteering within developing countries (e.g., Broad, 2003; Simpson, 2004). In addition, these studies have overwhelmingly focussed on volunteer tourism as it relates to travel to partake in environmental conservation work, rather than how tourists work interactively with local communities on local projects and whereby the nature of the exchange is mainly cultural, or involves interaction with indigenous communities (i.e. communities or races of people who are endemic or native to a destination region) (Butler & Hinch, 1996). Cross-cultural experiences can be a rich source of narrative, learning, appreciation, inspiration, cultural respect, solidarity and equality in the search for sustainable models of tourism (Butler & Hinch, 1996; Sofield, 1991). Within previous literature, there has been little focus on the nexus between volunteer tourism and cultural tourism, especially in the context of indigenous tourism experiences and the rich narrative that may be created and exchanged between host and volunteer.

Drawing on gaps within the published literature, several questions therefore guided the present study. Specifically, do volunteer tourists gain different

meaning from their interactions with indigenous communities than those tourists who participate in traditional cultural tourism? Can the nature of the narrative created proffer an alternative, more sustainable, relationship between host and guest? In addressing these questions, the paper also sought to examine the nature of volunteer tourism experiences in a cultural context within a developed country, rather than the more widely reported experiences of volunteer tourists working on environmental projects in developing nations.

Study Method

Consistent with prior research into the nature of volunteer tourists' experiences (for example Broad, 2003; Simpson, 2004; Wearing, 2001), the present study sought to understand the experiences of volunteer tourists using qualitative research methods within an interpretive paradigm. Specifically, the study employed in-depth interviews, diaries and participant observation to examine the pre-, during, and post-trip experiences of 12 Australian visitors undertaking organised volunteer activities in a Maori community whilst staying on a *marae* (Maori village or traditional meeting place) in the North Island of New Zealand during January 2005. The respondents represented 80% of the total participants of a volunteer programme organised by an Australian non-government organisation registered with the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) that provides community and education development projects in Asia and South America. In addition to community development projects, the NGO organises projects in which young volunteers from Australia and New Zealand participate in welfare projects around the world. These welfare projects provide 'on the ground' assistance to communities and engage the volunteers and community in a mutual exchange.

The two week project in January 2005 involved two locations. The first week was based on a *marae* in the Bay of Plenty in the North Island of New Zealand; a region which has one of the highest proportions of Maori among the local population in New Zealand. The second week of the project was located in Auckland, the largest urban city in the North Island of New Zealand, with the volunteers providing aid to disabled adults. Typically, participants pay for their own air fare, accommodation and transport in the destination. As the total duration of the trip was relatively short, the participants can be considered 'shallow volunteer tourists' (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). The participants in the present study were all females aged between 16 and 19 years of age.

The organiser, one of the authors, who will also be referred to as the 'participant observer' has been involved in volunteer tourism and with this particular NGO for 18 years, as participant, organiser of projects and as a director of the organisation. The participant observer had worked with one of the local non-government organisations called Rural Education Action Programme (REAP) and the *Kaumatua* (Maori elders) of the *marae* in a previous project in 2003. The objectives of the project were to engage the volunteers in physical work and community activities. The programme in the Bay of Plenty included a welcome onto the *marae* where the group was staying, a session with the *Kaumatua* explaining the history of the *marae* and the local Maori people, together with cleaning, water blasting and painting on the *marae*. The community work entailed organising

and running a five day holiday programme for children from the Awatapu community, a suburb of Whakatane that has a low socioeconomic ratio and which received severe flood damage in July 2004. The population of Awatapu is approximately 50% Maori, with 80% of the children being Maori. Awatapu is a separate suburb of Whakatane from the *marae* where the volunteers were living. The holiday programme also involved art, crafts, drama, music and sports activities. The activities were orientated to performances, props and exhibitions that took place on the last day in a fun day for the whole community, especially for the parents and extended family, to participate in a sense of community and celebration.

To explore the deep, personal and experiential aspects of the volunteering experience, each volunteer was interviewed individually before and during their stay on the *marae* by the participant observer, as well as collectively during a focus group session at the end of their stay led by the other researcher. Each in-depth interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each of the 12 volunteers were also asked to keep a research diary throughout the duration of the stay in which they were asked to write down, at the end of each day, their key observations, memories and feelings, as well as things they had learned about Maori culture. The participant observer also kept a diary. The aim of the research was to record the experiences of respondents (that is, of both volunteers and hosts) as accurately as possible before, during and immediately after their stay, and to examine the volunteer experience from the volunteer's own perspective (Broad, 2003). These research methods were selected in preference to others, for example a survey, due to the small sample size of volunteers participating in this case study project and the need to record in-depth personal experiences (McIntosh, 1998).

The in-depth interviews and focus group session followed a semi-structured format which allowed for variation in the order of questions; however the main topics covered remained unchanged. Key questions asked during the individual and group interviews with volunteers included their reasons for deciding to take the trip, what they expected to gain from the trip, the most memorable experiences, the least memorable experiences, their knowledge about Maori culture, their views and experiences relating to staying on the *marae* and what they felt they had gained from their trip. Consistent with previous studies of the tourist experience, the in-depth interviews and focus group session employed the principles of the 'Laddering Technique' used in marketing to further probe the responses of participants in order to elicit the deeper personal values gained from their experiences (see Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). In-depth interviews with the Maori hosts, *Kaumatua* (elders) and social workers involved in the project were also undertaken before, during and after the visit to establish the attitudes, motivations and experiences of hosts. It is important that host communities have their voices heard in any examination of tourism experience (Wearing, 2004), and that cultural acceptance and control is paramount for sustainable tourism encounters (Butler & Hinch, 1996; McIntosh *et al.*, 2004).

Each host and volunteer interview, and the focus group, was tape recorded and later transcribed to ensure the accuracy of data. Each author, separately, used content analysis, summation of the transcripts and research diaries to identify categories that integrate and generalise major themes. The authors then

came together for comparison and to confirm the common themes emerging from the data. An inductive approach to the data analysis was used, whereby a set of categories grounded in the data were established so that key themes that emerged were described by respondents using their own words (McIntosh, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach was chosen to mitigate any potential participant observer bias as a consequence of one of the author's past volunteer tourism experiences and her role as the organiser of the group. The volunteer participants were also given the opportunity, through a follow-up focus group, to review and comment on the study's findings to further enhance the validity and reliability of the interpretative themes and conclusions drawn.

Study Findings

The volunteer tourist experience

Key themes emerging from the data showed the nature of the interaction and cultural experiences gained by the 12 volunteer tourists to be different from that reported in previous studies of cultural tourism more generally. The nature of the experience gained by the volunteer tourists involved a different narrative and constituted an 'alternative' Maori cultural product, one that was rich in authentic cultural content and personal interactions, genuine and reflective of modern Maori life in New Zealand society. These findings are elaborated below in relation to volunteers' motivations and experiences of the trip, and are demonstrated with quotes taken from the personal journals and interviews conducted. Potentially, these reported alternative experiences may facilitate a more sustainable form of tourism compared to traditional cultural tourism consumption.

Motivation for undertaking volunteer tourism on a marae in New Zealand

The findings of the study showed that the main motivation for undertaking the volunteer project was not primarily related to sightseeing but to volunteering, to 'work; not just be tourists', 'to give' and 'to experience a service project'. The service project was also seen to allow participants to experience 'real' New Zealand people through a cultural encounter; 'to see how they live and to make connections'. One respondent explained that 'My main motivation was to give, because I know in giving you are happy. I saw and spoke to others who had done this type of project and I could see it was so rewarding I wanted to do something like this.' Other volunteers explained how 'I really wanted to do volunteer work. It was really attractive and I thought it was important that I do something like this'; 'I wanted to do a service project. This came up so I said why not. New Zealand was not the real attraction. I would have done any project that had the combination of overseas and volunteer work; and mum and dad said yes'; 'It was not about New Zealand, tourism or Maori, but it was expectations about service projects'; 'I was looking for new experiences, ones that challenged me, seeing other countries, but not as a traditional tourist; I actually like helping people.'

Most of the participants had made contact with others who had participated in volunteer work and they explained that 'you could see they had got so much

out of it'; 'when they talked about their experiences their face glowed'; 'they were so happy because they gave'; 'you could see it was a special experience and I wanted it too'; 'when I heard what they did and saw the photos of the kids and the impact they made I made up my mind "yes" I am going to do a service project.' That volunteer tourists exhibit greater altruistic motives for travel than other cultural tourists potentially confirms previous conclusions drawn elsewhere (see, for example, Richards, 2001; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Uriely *et al.*, 2003; Wearing, 2002).

The 'alternative' nature of volunteer tourists' experiences of Maori culture

The experiences gained by the volunteers on the *marae* and working in the Awatapu Holiday Programme could be conceptualised as three layers of experience – their experiences of Maori culture, their experiences relating to self and their experiences of their interaction and relationship with their Maori hosts. The integration of these three layers makes the nature of the experiences gained by the volunteer tourists different, or 'alternative', to those gained by cultural tourists experiencing traditional cultural products, as reported in previous literature; they pose a different, potentially more sustainable, narrative between host and guest. (Wearing, 2001). The three layers of experience are elaborated below.

Experience of Maori culture

Consistent with previous studies of indigenous tourism (see McIntosh, 2004), most of the volunteers held very little previous knowledge about Maori culture and held very traditional stereotypical impressions about Maori people prior to their visit. Respondents commented that they 'Didn't know anything about Maori culture; all I knew was the *haka* [Maori war challenge]', 'I only knew about rugby and the *haka*; the visible things'; and 'I had watched the movie "Whale Rider" but I didn't really know anything.' One respondent described their expectation of a traditional encounter with Maori people:

> I don't really know much about the *marae.* I thought we might be living in little huts that would house three of us in one hut, so when I saw it with all our beds lined up next to each other, it was completely different to what I had expected. The welcome was different to what I had expected as well. I had this little vision that they'd all be in their national costumes and that we'd be welcomed over a bridge on a lake with a waterfall in the background; it's all very different to that; I think I maybe expected too much of traditional Maori.

Whilst volunteers expected to receive a traditional view of Maori culture, their experience on the *marae* and dealing with the children and their families in Awatapu related predominantly to the contemporary lifestyle of Maori, including, for example, experiences of contemporary Maori family values, association with tribal gangs and drugs, cultural 'rules', and the sense of community spirit. This is in contrast to the majority of tourists' experiences or *'gazing'* of traditional cultural tourism reported elsewhere (see McIntosh, 2004; McKercher & Du Cros, 2002; Ryan & Huyton, 2002). Respondents described how 'The kids

have let us see what life is *really* like for them', 'it's more hands-on; learning about everyday', 'we even got involved in the subculture', 'this is a modern and "real" experience; we were treated like we were from here.' As one volunteer commented to the organiser after the briefing session with the host community organiser: 'I did not realise we could get involved with gangs; that is stuff out of the movies.' The participant observer similarly noted in her diary that,

> The volunteers are commenting a lot and very fascinated about the gangs and culture associated with gangs. This is an aspect of the culture they did not expect to encounter. The volunteers discuss how the kids talk about how their parents are in the gangs and how they will join the gangs when they get older. The kids are recruited for the gangs at a young age.

The nature of Maori family values was also a feature of what the volunteers learned about Maori culture from their trip. They described Maori culture as: 'having such a strong feeling of family', 'they've got attitude with the kids as part of the gangs, but they all look out for each other', 'they put themselves last.'

As volunteers, the respondents learned a lot about contemporary Maori lifestyle by visiting them in their own homes. Participants recounted:

> I went to one of the kid's family home; Jess came with me. The home was small, simple and tidy; everything was normal. But when we went to another little boy's house, you could see the attitude of lack of care; junk in the garage and backyard, kitchen a mess, kids toys everywhere and clothes. We asked his sister, who was very shy, where their mother was and she said in the bedroom stoned with her boyfriend. Us two girls felt very uncomfortable and scared. We had never been near anyone so close who was stoned before; it was the stuff of movies and hip hop songs.

The participant observer noted:

> The conversation at dinner tonight was very interesting; everyone was passing on their experiences but the focal point was the three families and why they are so different. They all live in the same community, all Maori, but why has there been such different impacts on the kids, on the family and their outlook on life. The girls asked lots of questions about the history of Maori culture, why some were marginalised, the Christianisation of Maori. Are the complexities in Maori culture just a mirror of the complexities in wider western society? Why is western society like this? What is the connection between economic development, family stability, cultural integrity and identity? The experience is really making them think about things they have never thought about before.

Whilst previous studies have concluded that cultural tourists demand more authentic experiences of indigenous culture by interacting with their indigenous hosts in the host's own community (McIntosh, 2004; McIntosh & Johnson, 2004; Ryan & Huyton, 2002), it is unlikely that other cultural tourists will gain the same depth of interaction and experience as a volunteer tourist. Indeed, it has been argued that 'institutionalised mass tourists' and tourists who engage in a cultural encounter based on 'economic exchange' have less opportunity

for direct, genuine and meaningful encounters with their hosts (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002; Uriely & Reichel, 2000). However, this conclusion requires further empirical validation.

The volunteers also compared their experiences of staying on the *marae* and working in the community with a day visit to a commercial Maori cultural attraction centred on a traditional Maori cultural performance in Rotorua, the most popular centre of Maori cultural tourism. Their perception was that the nature of the experience they had gained on the *marae* was more genuine and 'real'. The participant observer noted that the volunteers had to make adjustments and accommodate both dimensions of the same culture: the commodified version in Rotorua and the cultural experience in the Maori community. The following quote from a volunteer illustrates this:

> To think this is all the tourists see; I think we are going to leave New Zealand so much more enriched having seen the real Maori; how they live in the modern world yet they still have their identity.

Whilst the volunteers' experiences predominantly related to experiences of contemporary Maori lifestyle, aspects of the traditional values and customs of Maori culture were also experienced by the group, although the traditional values were arguably experienced within a contemporary context. This can be illustrated from the following quotes:

> The actual *powhiri* (welcome) was quite laid back and informal. I learned that there were many rules; how we had to be welcomed on the *marae,* how you couldn't wear shoes, the rules about the women and a division of gender and gender roles.

> I thought [during the *powhiri*] they would translate what they said in Maori into English. They did speak a little in English but you could feel it was not everything they said in Maori. I asked one of the ladies later what was said and she explained it to me. She said, 'We are welcoming you into our home, our community, our ancestors will look over you.' It was nice; if I did not ask I would not have known. I asked her why it was not explained by the man in the welcoming ceremony. She said the welcoming ceremony is 'Not only for you but it is part of our ritual and culture; it is for us.'

As such, the experiences gained by the volunteer tourists in their interaction with Maori people were potentially more informal, interactive and authentic than that experienced by visitors to traditional Maori tourist attractions (McIntosh, 2004; McIntosh & Johnson, 2004; Taylor, 2001).

Experience of self

Although the experiences gained by the volunteers centred on an appreciation of Maori culture, the experience additionally involved an experience related to self. Self-reflection and personal development are characteristic of the volunteer tourism experience generally (Arai, 2000; Broad, 2003; Wearing, 2001, 2002; Wearing & Deane, 2003). Whilst appreciation of one's current life has been a feature of tourists' reactions at some cultural attractions (see, e.g., Beeho & Prentice, 1997; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Phelps, 2001), arguably, a deeper

experience that develops the potential of the individual, or an experience that is considered cathartic, is not widely associated with traditional cultural tourism consumption.

The participant observer noted the volunteers' reflections of self in her diary:

> Another thing that is happening to the volunteers is that they are reflecting on and evaluating their own lives, their families and the choices they have made and the attitudes they are forming. One commented about how coming here, seeing the kids, hearing about family backgrounds made her appreciate everything she has.

This was echoed in the reflection of one volunteer on her own family life:

> Seeing these kids with their blended families and living with aunts and grandmothers made me think about my own family. I did not realise how much mum and dad have done for me and for my brothers and sisters. They must have sacrificed a lot. Mum and dad have nothing for themselves, everything is for us.

Other volunteers described how, 'By reflecting on my own culture, I've had spiritual growth' and 'Our western society is so defined by materialism and I can see how I have been caught up in it.' The participant observer noted that 'The issue of suffering came up in the conversation at the dinner table; why some people suffer and others don't; why some are lucky – you don't choose the family you are born into.' One of the volunteers expressed the following:

> I knew it would be a life changing experience, and that you learnt about other cultures and a different way of life from other people, and it is life changing because you don't know what you have and now you know you're better off than other people; the education I've got and to be able to help other people. I think from now on, I'll be more involved in other forms of projects like donating more to World Vision; helping more in the community, listening more at home, helping mum more often.

Meaningful interpersonal experience

Also situating their own lives within the context of the experience, the experience involved interpersonal narratives and relationships – a creative cultural exchange. The volunteers described how their experiences had been influenced by the relationships they had developed with the Maori children, and from generally mixing with people from another culture. They defined the essence of the experience as a 'personally meaningful relationship': 'The more you give of yourself in the relationship, the more you enjoy yourself and the more you get back'; 'It feels like you've just gone away for a bit and come back. We felt really cool; everyone treats you like you're from here.' Similarly, Brown and Morrison (2003) argue that volunteer tourists make genuine friendships in the process of interaction. However, the extent to which traditional cultural tourists, in contrast to volunteer tourists, experience a meaningful and lasting relationship with the indigenous hosts with whom they interact remains an issue for further investigation. Previous literature has argued that the short time frame and generalist

nature of most cultural tourism experiences render the experience shallow and less authentic (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002; Ryan *et al.,* 2000).

The nature of the volunteers' experiences and the relationships they developed with their hosts can be illustrated in the following quotes:

> We learned a lot from the experience but the biggest things we got out of it were the personally meaningful relationships. We got to know them so well; it was like we'd known them our whole life. The smallest things could bring a smile to their face and if you remembered their name, it meant so much. They smiled all the time and it made you feel so good; we touched those kids.

> I felt more like a New Zealander than an Australian because I feel so welcomed and it was really good to say when people asked me that I was staying on the *marae.* This girl gave me a photo and it was the only photo she had and she gave it to me because she wanted me to remember her. One girl also gave me a greenstone pendant that had been given to her by her grandmother and it was the first time it had been outside of her family. That was a really powerful moment.

The host community's response

What remains to be addressed is to examine how open and responsive were the host community initially, and throughout the volunteering project, and what impact did the volunteers leave on the community. The following narratives portray the perspectives reported by *Kaumatua* (Maori elders) from the *marae,* the non-Maori social worker who organised the holiday programme in Awatapu and members of the Awatapu community who helped with the holiday programme and its activities, and interacted with the volunteers.

Hosts' attitudes to the volunteer tourism project

The *Kaumatua* generally reported favourable attitudes to the volunteer project on the *marae;* primarily, this attitude was based on the precedent set by a previous group of volunteers who had visited the *marae* three years earlier and the trust that had been established with the organiser. He explained that,

> I took a risk last time [in 2003] in inviting a group of young volunteers onto the *marae.* I was concerned about late night parties, drinking, the bad boys of Whakatane hanging around the *marae.* I was concerned about the impact all this would have on the Maori families living around the *marae.* But I took the proposal to the Board. One advantage of this group was that the women did not have to cook and take care of the group. They were going to cook and clean for themselves, but not only that, they were going to help us with activities for our very young and clean around the *marae.* They were coming to give, not to take. Anyway the first project went well.

The social worker expressed his apprehensions about the volunteer tourism project but these, he reported, were alleviated relatively quickly:

> I wasn't quite sure what the group was going to be like, the make up, the actual backgrounds, what their expectations were going to be and their

experiences prior to this project. I thought they were a really good group. When I met them I laid down some ground rules, I talked about Maori and some of the gang influences. I think I went over the top but it kept them in line and they did not take risks and they were very positive. I was really happy with the group; with the way they rose to the occasion and got involved.

Hosts' perceptions of the volunteers

The host respondents were generally positive in their perceptions of the volunteers and their conduct during volunteering activities. For instance, both the *Kaumatua* and the adults accompanying the volunteers during the welcome onto the *marae* reported that they were very impressed with the effort the volunteers made to prepare a Maori *waiata* (song) for the *powhiri* (welcome) and how well they sang it. As one elder commented, their *waiata* showed they 'came with an openness and wanting to make an effort to appreciate our culture'. The social worker further explained:

> The two groups [the children and the volunteers] just met and it was on, there was no animosity, there was an openness, open friendliness that caused them to react straight away, both groups came together, they supported each other, had fun, they enjoyed that closeness, they did share their own stories, especially the boys that want to be gang members; they were open. They felt quite big talking about their experiences and their families and the fact that someone from the outside was genuinely interested was cool for them and probably important at their stage of development. There were no ruptures or conflicts; it was a two way thing.

A member of the Awatapu community further confirmed the positive perception held of the volunteers:

> The volunteers came in with no 'airs'; 'hey we are better than you', 'you can learn from us' etc. The message they gave out to those kids was 'we want to be with you'. We want to know you and we want to have fun with you. You saw that in the first hour. They were interested in the kids. They gave the kids their undivided attention. They were not interested in their own things or wanting to rush off at lunch time or later. They were there as long as the kids wanted them to be there.

Hosts' perceptions of the impact of the volunteers on the community

Generally, the hosts believed that the volunteers had had a positive impact on the community. For the *Kaumatua,* the example set by the volunteers was reported to be the biggest impact on the community. As one elder explained,

> The positive thing was seeing young people, *Pakeha* (non-Maori), coming to do all this community volunteer work. They give up their time, they pay for everything. Sometimes the elders complain about the negative influences of Western society on our young. They get all these negative images that lead our young to only be interested in self, ignoring the *whanau* (extended family/smaller tribal unit) and the community. Our young sometimes do not take on board Maori cultural values such as

giving back to the community because of all these negative influences. It helped the elders to see young *Pakeha* serving them and wanting to help them. It helped the young people and brought them closer. No, the group contributed a lot to our community.

For one Maori member of the Awatapu community, an ex-gang member, the benefit came from the cultural exchange:

This holiday programme with the volunteers from Australia helped the kids identify with their culture. These volunteers were interested in them and in their culture and it made them proud to be Maori. They were important to strangers, to outsiders. These people engaged with them personally. The kids had something to share, their life, themselves, their culture. Since the programme more kids are part of the *kapahaka* (Maori dance) at school. The boys want to get into the music. There is more interest in the local legends and local identity, devoid of gang culture which has dominated too many of our lives for too long. The volunteers contributed to this but we still have a long way to go.

The volunteers were also felt to be positive 'role models' for the Maori children and this was translated through the interaction and positive conversations between the children and the volunteers. As one community member explained,

In their conversations and through their friendships they were a wonderful role model for the kids. I heard some of the conversations. There was one of the volunteers with two 10-11 year old girls and they were painting one of the props for the drama. They were talking about children. One of the young girls asked the volunteer does she want to have a baby. She said she wanted a husband first, who can be the father of the baby, and then I want a baby. They said to her so you do not want a baby to your boyfriend. She replied I do not know yet if my boyfriend is going to stay with me to see our baby grow up. I want my baby to have their mother and father with them if possible. The volunteer just explained what she wanted, she did not ask the girls personal questions. They asked her straight, she answered them straight. There was no moralising, but a positive message was delivered.

Conclusion

This paper examined the nature of the volunteer tourism experience in the search for alternative and sustainable experiences through cultural tourism. Qualitative research undertaken with community hosts and 12 Australian volunteers working on a *marae* in the Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand found the nature of the volunteer tourism experience to be mutually beneficial to both host and volunteer. The case study presented here represents volunteer tourism in a cultural context within a developed country and showed that the nature of the experiences gained by the volunteers were seemingly different from those gained by tourists experiencing traditional cultural products; specifically, it was more authentic, genuine, reflexive, of contemporary cultural content and a meaningful interpersonal experience. This extends the conceptualisation of the cultural tourism experience more commonly reported in the literature to

date; it thus adds to our understanding about less traditional forms of cultural tourism. Indeed, volunteering is arguably central to a model of alternative cultural tourism as the experience gained was found to evoke intrinsic motivation, is beneficial to both host and volunteer and based on meaningful interaction (Wearing & Neil, 2000).

With volunteer tourism, intense rather than superficial social interactions can occur; a new narrative between host and guest is created, a narrative that is engaging, genuine, creative and mutually beneficial. The narrative and traditional interaction between host and tourist is thus potentially rewritten as the tourist experience is actively constructed by the host as well as the tourist. In this way, volunteer tourism has the potential to foster creative, alternative and more sustainable forms of tourism activity. It is a form perhaps akin to the ideals promoted by the early pioneers of sustainable tourism, and, aligned to the principles of those who advocate creative tourism as an alternative model of cultural tourism (e.g., Richards & Wilson, 2006). Critics, however, may argue against the ethics of volunteer tourism as a 'best practice' form of tourism (Wearing, 2004), for example, viewing it as contributing to the curtailment of self-sufficiency in communities. Thus, future research should more closely examine the cross-cultural nature of the interaction between volunteer tourists and indigenous hosts, as well as the longer term sustainable benefits attributing to both in order to move beyond the precursory evidence provided here.

In particular, this study involved volunteers of a similar (younger) age, gender and culture. Further research is needed to examine how cultural experiences may be experienced by volunteers of differing profiles, and how cross-cultural experiences may differ among participants (hosts and guests) of relatively greater cultural diversity. Furthermore, quantitative research is needed so that potential differences between volunteers and traditional cultural tourists can be validated. Comparison to different cultural contexts is also required. For example, this study provides insights into volunteer tourism in a cultural context in a developed nation; how this compares to a range of other cultural contexts in other developed nations, or how this contrasts with the experiences gained in developing nations, also requires investigation. Moreover, this study only considered one volunteer tourism organisation. There is thus further scope to draw comparison between differing volunteer organisations. Of particular note, the volunteers in this study were primarily motivated by volunteering; travel was a secondary motivation. This may not be the case for all volunteer organisations and, thus, the resulting interaction between host and volunteer may also be different.

Although a rich insight into the experiential nature of the volunteer tourism experience in a cultural context was gained in this study, further qualitative research is required to further examine the narratives between hosts and volunteers in other case study contexts. The precursory findings provided here provide some evidence to suggest that the host–volunteer encounter has the potential to be authentic, mutually beneficial and more sustainable than traditional cultural tourism consumption. Thus, the study provides further evidence to support anecdotal conclusions made elsewhere to confirm that indigenous tourism products based on more genuine and meaningful encounters are potentially the most sustainable option for indigenous communities in sharing their culture

with tourists (see McIntosh, 2004). For this reason, we argue that the nexus of volunteer tourism and cultural tourism requires more pressing research attention in the search for alternative cultural experiences through tourism.

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