

A Culturally Relevant Symbol: Participant Engagement in a Volunteer Tourism Youth Education Program and Impacts on Program Youth
Research conducted by Lana Olsen

Problem

International volunteer-led educational programs in the global South tend to focus on health and wellness, sports, and areas such as environmental care. Daraja Music Initiative (DMI), a US based nonprofit sending volunteer tourist teachers to Moshi, Tanzania (Kilimanjaro region), promotes an “awareness of conserving Mpingo - commonly referred to as African Blackwood...by actively engaging students and the community with the power of music” (DMI, 2018) Questions tend to arise in response to this statement, such as, how do DMI volunteer teacher tourists engage students and community members through their program? How does engagement relate to sustainable volunteer tourism programming? What do volunteers tourists add to program outcomes?



Research

This research obtained perspectives from volunteer tourists, DMI youth, and community members to gain a pluralistic understanding of what *engagement* means to each key stakeholder. It also sought to explore the concept of engagement within the context of volunteer tourism using a newly created engagement theoretical framework.

To study volunteer tourism, the research was conducted with DMI. Each summer since 2010, DMI has provided an interdisciplinary approach to sustainability through music education trips (DMI, 2018) and by planting Mpingo trees (African Blackwood), the wood of which is used to make clarinets. During the span between June 5 - July 21, 2017, the primary collection of information was conducted in the Moshi area through observations, interviews, and focus groups with community residents, program youth, and volunteer tourist teachers.

Findings



The primary reason for participant engagement in this program is the Mpingo (tree), the symbolic bridge between community members and DMI volunteers traveling to this area to teach. This culturally relevant symbol helps to connect, aids in the communication between, and gives hope to, participants. Community members engage in this program because of what this symbol, the national tree of Tanzania, means to them: *environmental conservation and a hope for future possibilities in their community*. Volunteer tourist teachers engage in DMI because of their *passion for music, and desire to sustain a community in which the wood for the clarinet is grown*. As one volunteer tourist teacher said, “this connecting my instrument with the tree in which it comes...through these educational outreach programs...with the communities where this product comes from is just one small way in trying to make a bigger difference.”

International Tourism Management Implications

- Volunteer tourist and community member engagement plays an important role in the planning, and the sustaining, of volunteer tourism community development programs,
- Program youth perspectives about program impacts may result in prospective youth leadership and future adult civic engagement,
- Program skill matched volunteers are likely to be repeat volunteers which leads to group cohesion and volunteer tourism program sustainability,
- Hope appears to be a significant motive for program participation in an international volunteer tourist-led community development project.

Recommendations

Recommendations for industry practioners include educating sending organizations and volunteers about Mzungu influence (possible link to colonialism). For Daraja Music Initiative in particular, understand potential benefits of engaging local community members (which includes youth) in DMI curriculum development. For Moshi community and Tanzanian government, utilize youth perspectives to create curriculum to benefit program youth participants, and other youth in this community.

Researcher

In May 2018 Lana Olsen graduated with her Ph.D, in Community Resources and Development under the direction of Dr. Kathleen Andereck. She would like to thank Tourism Cares for the Scholarship contribution towards this dissertation study, and DMI and Moshi community members for their willingness to participate.