

Help or Hurt?

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Before the summer holidays, I was introduced to an Australian student, Laura, who has been living in my home country Nepal for the past few years. I asked, "Laura, what do you do in Nepal?" She replied enthusiastically, "Oh! I am a volunteer, helping villagers make eco-friendly bags. Have you ever heard of volunteer tourism?" I've been involved in a volunteer project at school to raise funds for helping disaster stricken cities in the Tohoku region. To me, volunteering has always been a noble act. However, after reading a few articles on volunteer tourism, I started to question whether it is an act of generosity or one of selfishness.

Volunteer tourism is a program in which people travel for a short period to a certain place, usually to a developing country, to help local people improve their standard of living. For instance, an organization called Restoration Works International arranges tours to countries like Nepal, where volunteers aid in restoring cultural heritage sites.

Although volunteer tourism sounds like a great concept, there are negative consequences as well. In some cases, volunteers insist on keeping their own way of living, rather than adopting the local lifestyle. My grandmother had a bitter experience while hosting some volunteers. Nepal has a serious water shortage problem. However, the volunteers who stayed with my grandmother never put forth the effort to save water by taking a shower only once a week as the local people do.

So, is volunteer tourism truly as beneficial as it sounds? Although programs are set up to solve problems, I believe the programs themselves could become a problem, rather than being part of a solution. According to a report published in the Third World Quarterly journal, a large number of volunteers are interested only in improving their personal portfolios to attract potential, future employers.

It is not always the volunteers who are squandering this beautiful idea of volunteer tourism. The local people tend to rely more and more on volunteers to solve their own problems. As a result, most programs lose focus, which is to teach the local population practical and effective life skills. Daniela Papi, a tour organizer, reported in a BBC article that these programs often hurt, and not help those who are in need.

The world needs more volunteers like Laura, whose priority is helping people, rather than making personal gains. Remember how the disasters in Tohoku rallied thousands of volunteers from around the world, including Nepal, to lend a hand in the massive relief effort. We all can agree that the volunteers' motives were selfless acts of kindness. I believe volunteers working in developing countries must have a similar kind of spirit and determination in order to help elsewhere. Of course, as middle school students, we may not yet be ready to travel to third world countries, or possess adequate skills. However, we can take part in activities, such as collecting PET bottle caps, to raise money to support credible and caring organizations of our choice. Generosity mustn't be measured by how much one does, yet by how much we can change others' lives through acts of kindness and compassion. Help or hurt? It depends upon not only what you intend to do, but also how you do it.

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