











# CHOOSING THE ULTIMATE WORKING HOLIDAY

Voluntourism is an appealingly altruistic way to travel but you need to think carefully about your motives and those of the host organisation before selecting a project

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THIS PAGE: Energising the kids on World Ocean Day; survey work requires a patient and thorough approach. OPPOSITE PAGE: Biosphere Expeditions' temporary base in South Africa



**“The credibility that being an ethical business can bring in this market is strong, so organisations like to portray themselves that way, but it cannot be assumed they actually are” ~ Victoria Smith**

qualified projects, there are thousands of far tinier dedicated operations. Focused on specific issues or communities, these tackle everything from conservation to poverty reduction and disaster relief.

One example is the Marine Conservation Programme run by the Song Saa Foundation in Cambodia. Ben Thorne, project director, says: “We initiate projects that support local communities and environments of the Koh Rong Archipelago. Our volunteers aid the conservation of local marine resources while engaging in community engagement activities, such as children’s education, organic farming, health and well-being and beach clean-ups.”

My own experience in Rimbang Baling was set up by Biosphere Expeditions. They specialise in conservation-based trips, often working together with a local partner, in this case WWF-Indonesia. Matthias Hammer, founder of Biosphere says, “The market splits itself into two segments: one is gap year – young people – and the other is adults with jobs who want to dip their toe in, to ‘give back’.”

They all face a challenge in choosing an organisation with an approach that optimises the impact of their skills and commitment.

Hammer says they often get enquiries from people who have done trips with other groups. “Sometimes they say it was brilliant because the scientist was very good, but often they say ‘I would never go again because I wasn’t really needed, I didn’t understand the contribution I was making, they were just after my money.’”

Dismayed by the misinformation out there, Biosphere offers its own top 10 tips for would-be volunteers. “For me it’s visceral,” Hammer says. “We are not a company, we are a non-profit. That’s right at the top of the 10 tips: look at what set-up they have. Are they a non-profit? Do they publish their results? Is the website full of people cuddling animals which you shouldn’t do? Are they transparent, do they show where the money goes?”

With many voluntourism projects costing £1,000 a week, the money can be transformative if enough of it is passed on. But don’t be fooled by a high price tag. In early 2014, a study by Leeds Metropolitan University, published in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, looked at comparable volunteer tourism products on a price-per-day basis, and found that the more expensive the product, the less it communicated about its responsibility.

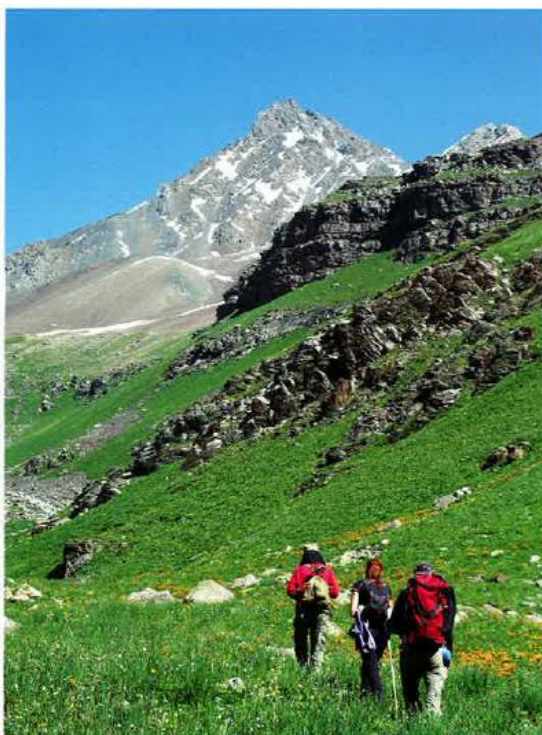
The lead author of the study, Victoria Smith, also cautioned that being a non-profit is no guarantee of the organisation’s integrity: “It cannot be assumed that a charity automatically demonstrates better practice, or that a for-profit business automatically is worse. The credibility that being an ethical business can bring in this market is strong, so organisations like to portray themselves that way, but it cannot be assumed they actually are.”

As for the difference between voluntourism and pure volunteering, that is often, but not always, apparent in the length of commitment. Framing it as a form of ‘travel’, albeit a working holiday, usually implies a period of days or weeks, rather than

months. To its critics, this is one of voluntourism's biggest failings: that the commitment is too short, that it is too much tourism and not enough volunteering, that is not much more useful than hanging your hotel towels back up or leaving your bed unchanged for a day or two.

Such criticism has organisations looking to distance themselves from the term 'voluntourism'. Like Biosphere, Coral Cay Conservation uses 'citizen science' to collect the data needed to drive better management and conservation of underwater habitats. Tessa Dawson, volunteer coordinator with Coral Cay says: "Voluntourism covers such a broad spectrum of activities. In addition, the balance between volunteering and tourism activities is different for every single organisation...Coral Cay Conservation has its own mission and projects and we employ scientists to manage them...Although we have set start dates, volunteers can join us for as long as they wish."

Often key to this question is what skills need to be imparted to volunteers before they are able to do what is required. In Song Saa's case, the minimum requirement is a four-week commitment: "This allows us to complete the required reef ecology training before they go into their survey dives," says Thorne. Biosphere's land-based survey in Sumatra required little more than basic familiarity with the equipment, which was taught in a morning's introduction session, so our two-week commitment was still enough to make a worthwhile contribution.



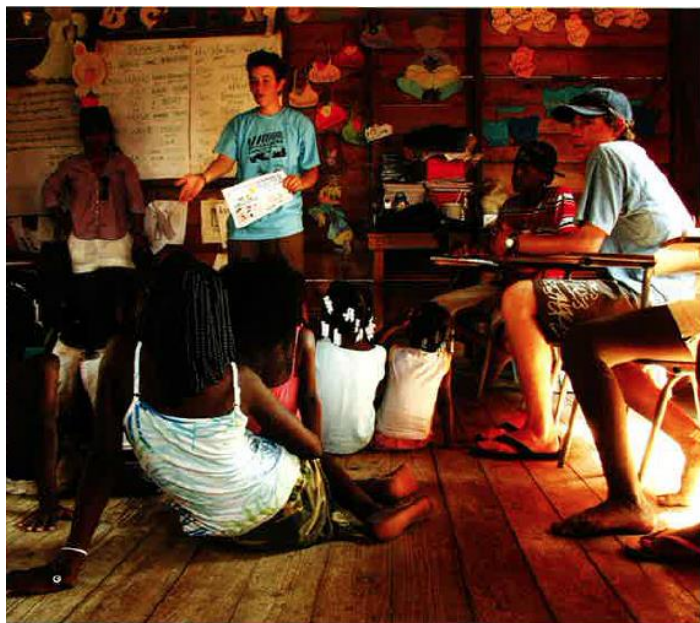
THIS PAGE: Wildlife surveying can bring breathtaking vistas; rewarding sightings are a perk of the job. OPPOSITE PAGE: Learning to use a camera trap.



There are even cases where voluntourism may be worse than doing nothing at all. Natural disasters typically produce a flood of enquiries from do-gooders wanting to rush to help. Yet their skills may be a poor fit. There have been instances when groups of volunteers have helped build or rebuild schools and homes in impoverished places in the world only to have them taken down again later as poorly built or not fit for local needs.

This is an especially important issue where people, and particularly kids, are involved. Volunteering in orphanages, for example, is best avoided. The last thing that children who have been abandoned need is an endlessly revolving set of new people in their lives. Yet the desire to work with such kids is so strong that unscrupulous operators have set up bogus orphanages. Haiti is one example, where there was a lack of orphanages before the huge quake in 2010. Once entrepreneurs there saw how outsiders reacted to the sight of thousands of parentless kids, they set up





THIS PAGE: Planting the message early; reef surveys call for solid dive skills. OPPOSITE PAGE: Looking for snow leopards in the Altai

was a stream of anecdotes from those living in the park's several villages, or working on oil palm and rubber plantations, about tigers. That suggests the next phase will split into groups doing deeper surveys, and others focusing on trust building with communities to better understand their needs and to work with local schools.

## Further info

Biosphere Expeditions  
[www.biosphere-expeditions.org](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org)

Coral Cay Conservation  
[www.coralcay.org](http://www.coralcay.org)

Earthwatch  
[www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org)

Song Saa Foundation  
[www.songsaafoundation.org](http://www.songsaafoundation.org)

For further inspiration see [www.inspiredescapes.com](http://www.inspiredescapes.com) or search the database of smaller projects at [www.grassrootsvolunteering.org](http://www.grassrootsvolunteering.org)

I think quite often of my time in Sumatra and hope one day to return to Rimbang Baling. In such a populous country eager for development, the area faces real pressure from poachers, loggers and others. Volunteering there brought me face-to-face with aspects of conservation I had previously only read of. I certainly gained from that.

Ultimately though, you should volunteer for what it does for the host community, for the stakeholders on the ground. Self-interest is fine to a point but 'making a difference' is not about making yourself feel good, it should be measurable. Think of voluntourism as more like choosing an employer, than a holiday. 🌱

