

Combining Volunteer Opportunities with Eco-Tourist Activities:

An innovative and exportable model for promoting voluntourism

Brooke Porter, Greg Kaufman and Paul Forestell • brooke@pacificwhale.org
Pacific Whale Foundation, Maui, Hawaii



ABSTRACT

Volunteer-based vacations are becoming widespread in the tourism market and the term "voluntourism" is a now widely accepted as part of the travel vernacular. Considerable research has been dedicated to investigating the motives behind participation in voluntourism, although the difference in professed interest and actual participation has yet to be explored. Pacific Whale Foundation acts as host and hub for Volunteering on Vacation, a voluntourism program that offers volunteer opportunities through multiple partner agencies. Entering its third year, the Volunteering on Vacation program model was originally designed in response to limitations of existing volunteer opportunities on Maui. Common limiting factors amongst host volunteer agencies included limited operating hours, small staff and/or accessibility. Utilizing its ecotour operations, including staff and resources, Pacific Whale Foundation was able to address these previous limiters of volunteer programs with a simple co-marketing approach. Pacific Whale Foundation continues to market the Volunteering on Vacation program parallel to and as a follow up activity to its highly sought-after marine ecotours. Participation from 2007 to 2008 increased nearly five fold, suggesting the efficacy of this strategic model. It is proposed that co-marketing a volunteer opportunity alongside or as a follow-up activity to an existing tour activity is a valuable and exportable model resulting in increased voluntourism participation. A survey of past participants is currently being undertaken to further investigate the Volunteering on Vacation model.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, the emerging trend of voluntourism has contributed to the pool of available volunteers. Whereas comprehensive environmental management strategies may take years to implement, volunteer-based conservation efforts offer immediate frontline response to pressing conservation issues; participation enforces and promotes positive environmental behaviors [1]. Many conservation-oriented organizations are challenged by staff size, maintaining consistency of effort, accessibility and general operational capabilities and seek to benefit from the use of volunteers [2]. Research shows that while interest in voluntourism is extremely high, actual participation in such programs is lagging [5]. The majority of available voluntour programs require long-term planning on the part of the participants, including a hefty fee and a multi-day commitment [6]. This case study proposes partnerships between tour operators and conservation organizations to produce single and/or half day, no-cost volunteer programs to exploit the pool of potential volunteers and travelers.

EXPORTABLE MODEL

Pacific Whale Foundation's partnerships with existing conservation-based organizations distinguish the Volunteering on Vacation Program from other voluntour programs. The model in discussion continues to appeal to the masses with participation increasing five fold following its pilot year, and is on an upward trend in its current year (Figure 1.0). The voluntour program continues to be strategically co-marketed alongside Pacific Whale Foundation's existing tour market. To attract visitors/residents to participate in the program, Pacific Whale Foundation runs ads and prints/distributes rack cards promoting Volunteering on Vacation (Figure 2.0). In addition, Pacific Whale Foundation encourages guests on its ocean ecotours to participate. Utilizing a previously captivated audience may better accommodate pre-disposed voluntourism desires and augment access to potential volunteers.

DISCUSSION

Pacific Whale Foundation acts as the conduit, linking conservation organizations that need volunteers with visitors/residents who are interested in volunteering. The partnerships between Pacific Whale Foundation and conservation organizations allow all to better fulfill their individual missions, while sustaining and offering free and accessible voluntourism opportunities. Pacific Whale Foundation's mission is achieved in part through this program by involving its members and customers in a supplemental follow-up conservation activity [4], and achieving resource protection through the removal of marine debris and native habitat restoration. The partner organizations receive hours of volunteer assistance (Table 1 – Hours of Effort) and the positive exposure from being involved in this program (which is promoted through brochures, websites, and posters). Through this program, Pacific Whale Foundation is able to provide transportation vehicles and surrogate staff (reservations, guides, graphics, marketing) which benefits partnering conservation organizations. Pacific Whale Foundation's promotional materials for this program also help to promote the partnering organizations.

Voluntourism combines hands-on conservation-related experiences and education while offering a more accurate depiction of the host culture and the issues it is facing. It is proposed that this co-marketed model be applied in the field of tourism to further the voluntourism market.

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RESULTS

TABLE 1. 2008 Hours of Effort

VOV PROJECT	Hours of Effort
Beach Cleanup	2424
Malama Honokowai	948
Hoaloha 'Aina	420
NPS Haleakala	686
Kanaha Project	135
Maui Coastal Land Trust	172
2008 TOTAL	4785

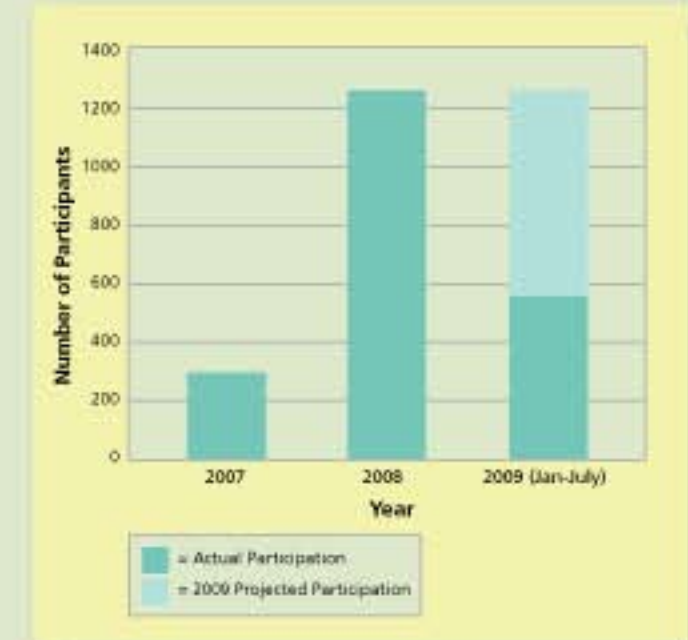
Pacific Whale Foundation's Volunteering on Vacation Program contributes significant volunteer hours to partner programs and projects.

Table 2.0 Description of Effort Overlap Associated with Tour Operations

Description of Effort(s)	Pacific Whale Foundation Ecotours	Volunteering on Vacation Overlap
Naturalist Staff	X	X
Volunteer Department	X	X
Reservations Department	X	X
Marketing Department	X	X
Graphics Design Team	X	X
Meeting/Training Facility	X	X
Transportation	X	X
Brochure/Rack Card	X	X
Print Advertisement	X	X
Radio Advertisement	X	X
Website	X	X

The efficacy of this model from in-house efforts associated with Pacific Whale Foundation as a tour operator can be attributed to the existing labors associated with a functioning tour operation.

Figure 1.0 Volunteering on Vacation Participation Trends



Overall tourism has fallen significantly during 2009, though participation in Volunteering on Vacation is nearly mirroring 2008 involvement.

