

## Exploitation of young gappers and vulnerable communities MUST stop.

“Irresponsible, lazy, ignorant, insensitive, disrespectful, uninformed and with no purpose”

This is the opinion of **people and places** – which is a volunteer recruitment organisation! But they're not talking about young 'gappers' here. They're talking about many of the organisations that recruit these young people for “volunteer” experiences.

**people and places'** work has just been recognised by the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards – the most prestigious and competitive of their kind in the world – winning the best volunteering category for 2009.

Judges Citation: "people and places has exercised leadership in a sector bedevilled by poor practice and established a replicable business model. Committed to reporting transparently on the money that volunteers pay, they ensure that the volunteers meet their full costs and are not a burden on the community; and carefully match the skills of volunteers to the needs of that community without replacing local labour. They have taken the ground breaking step of having their work externally audited and publishing it online. These four principles set not only a practicable standard for operators to aspire to, but offer valuable guidelines for tourists seeking legitimate and socially beneficial volunteering experiences."

**people and places** has been working with local communities in Africa, Asia and South America for the last 4 years, matching skilled volunteers to community needs, with the vast majority of volunteers to date having been over 35, with hard skills to offer.

Now the organisation believes this programme can be extended to the GAP market. As a campaigning organisation, it is keen to bring about change in this least responsible sector of the volunteer market.

“There's much debate about the validity of volunteering by the traditional 'gapper' – post school or university,” says Sallie Grayson, programme director at **people and places**, “but we firmly believe that these young people have real skills to share, and that with good management and planning, they can help to make a real difference in the communities we serve as well as having a meaningful adventure.

“We've worked with our local partners and their communities to design volunteer placements specifically for 'gappers', adding a younger element to the larger programme. These young people won't be replacing local employment and will be part of an ongoing programme that is helping vulnerable communities build the future they want for themselves. **We started people and places to campaign for integrity in the volunteer travel market and to promote responsible volunteering – we're proud that our work has been recognised by such prestigious awards, but we're not using this as an excuse to rest on our laurels! We see this award as an opportunity to raise the bar and challenge others to do the same.**”

Well-run volunteer placements provide true social interaction and can develop a profound understanding among people – they can be life-changing experiences for volunteers and local communities.

BUT, all too often, a volunteer trip can be a recipe for disaster – for both parties.

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When host communities are vulnerable and eager for assistance, it is a common occurrence for them to be bullied or exploited by volunteer service providers. All too often, a project has little say in the numbers or experience of volunteers who they feel obliged to accept. This lack of consultation can have devastating results – a school may be sent 10 or 12 young volunteers who find themselves hanging around with little to do, other than get in the way of hard pressed local people; gullible (but not guilty) young volunteers may arrive in their projects to discover that their hosts cannot afford to feed them because they cannot afford to feed themselves; volunteers find out that none of their hard earned money has found its way to these hard pressed communities.

There is often equally serious exploitation of young gappers.

“We hear far too many stories from young volunteers of abandonment at airports, last minute changes to completely inappropriate projects, placement in communities where no-one knows anything about them or the fact that they’re coming – until they’re “dropped of” by the local representative (who they can’t contact for the rest of their stay.)

“Inaccurate information is breathtaking and bordering on illegal – descriptions of homestay families who aren’t real but more of a ‘template’ to give a general idea of where these vulnerable young people “may” be staying.”

But how do trusting, well-meaning gappers find themselves in this kind of situation?

All too many volunteer organisations sell a smoke and mirrors promise, using all the buzz words and taking advantage of the fact that they can tell volunteers what they want to hear: “responsible, meaningful, sustainable, ethical, community driven – SAFE!”

**people and places** has developed a list of questions to ask – and they strongly suggest that all potential volunteers should ask these questions of any organisation they are considering travelling with.

“There are good organisations out there – usually with little or no marketing budget to compete with the presence of ‘the big boys’ – organisations like Blue Ventures, Peru’s Challenge, CREES, Azafady. We want to encourage gappers to find them, and we’ve produced the questions as a helpful tool – we also want gappers to search the chat rooms and forums, read newspaper archives, talk to their friends and families about volunteering.

“And if you’ve had a bad experience, post it on the web or contact us and we’ll post it.

“The bottom line is – do your research – use your head, not your heart!”

For further information

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