

Eco-volunteering programs as good practices for nature conservation and sustainable tourism development in protected areas

Micaela Solinas, Simona Clò, Manuela Nicosia

Abstract — The CTS, an Italian association involved in youth tourism and environment protection, acknowledged by the Ministry of the Environment, has a long experience in the planning and managing of programs in which environmental protection, local development and educational activities are linked. Since the early 90s, CTS started to issue volunteer tourism programs in which conservation and monitoring activities on endangered species were conceived as original features of summer camps for students and young people. This approach provided a new opportunity to support environmental initiatives chronically under-funded and was favourably considered by the European Commission, the Italian Ministry of the Environment and other institutions that granted the funds necessary to allow the projects increase and go on. Two more important results were also achieved: first, the development of tourist offers with a strong educational purpose and a low impact on the local environment; second, the creation of synergies between tourist and conservation programmes which, in turn, allowed to improve the local communities attitude towards research and conservation activities, thanks to the economic advantages generated by just such tourism. The success of the programs lies in the fact that tourist projects were created in harmony with scientific projects and were conceived to support and “serve” the research.

Index Terms — Eco-volunteering, volunteer tourism, sustainable tourism, environment conservation, protected areas.

1 AN OVERLOOK OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM

In the last few years a steadily growing body of works have examined volunteer tourism from different perspectives. Some studies, such as “[7]”, recognise in volunteer tourism an “expression of the so called “other” postmodern tourism, which emphasize the growing appeal of concepts such as “alternative”, “real”, “ecological” and “responsible” form of tourism; some others have ex-

plored impacts and implications in the relation between the volunteering “guest” and the host community “[5], [6]”; or the volunteer’s personal experience “[8], [10], [11], [12], [13] [14], [15]”.

Volunteer tourism has been defined in “[4]” as “utilizing discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need”. Broader definitions include environment conservation or research among the purposes of volunteer tourists described as those who “volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that may involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” “[12]”. Definitions and boundaries of volunteer tourism are still in flux, but even so it is considered as one of the fastest-growing forms of

M.S. is head of Sustainable Tourism and Protected Areas Department of CTS, Rome. E-mail: msolinas@cts.it

S.C. is the head of the Nature Conservation Department of CTS, Rome. E-mail: sclo@cts.it

M.N. is researcher junior and project assistant in Sustainable Tourism and Protected Areas Department of CTS, Rome. E-mail: turismoricerche@cts.it

alternative tourism, increasingly viewed and marketed by governments, non-government agencies and private commercial operators globally, as a creative and non consumptive solution to a wide range of social and environmental issues “[3]”.

When it focuses on environmental issues, volunteer tourism (or eco-volunteering) shows some distinctive features:

- active participation of volunteers in scientific activities carried out in a particular area to study and/or preserve endangered species or habitat;
- participation of volunteers is focused on personal responsibility and commitment in the environment protection;
- educational and scientific aspects take a prime role in the volunteering experience;
- researchers and the “ordinary” people (the volunteers) have the possibility to interact and develop a mutual understanding.

Volunteer tourism often includes the involvement of a NGO, deep-rooted in the territory and the local community or able, in any case, to act as a trait d’union between the scientists, the local administration and population, the broader civil society. NGOs, in fact, have taken thus far a prime role in the planning and organizing of volunteer tourism programs, pursuing the intention of achieving a socially appropriate and environmentally sound tourism, capable to really benefit local communities and to foster positive attitudes, values and actions in the tourists and the host communities themselves “[9]”.

When it provides financial contribution from participants, some other features bring volunteer tourism back in the track of “real” tourism, even though “alternative” or sustainable as it:

- directly benefits the local economy through the purchase of services and products necessary to host the volunteer-tourists (board and lodging, transports, etc.);
- provides economic support to nature conservation and to chronically under-funded environmental initiatives and projects;
- helps by enhancing the value of the natural (and cultural) resources of the area in

the local population opinion (administrators, stakeholders, people) and increasing consensus towards the institution of protected areas, if activities and programs are appropriately planned and managed.

In many countries ecovolunteers are playing an increasing role in nature conservation “[2]” but the development of programs where tourist volunteer make a financial contribution is less widespread and studied “[1]”.

This paper focuses around the idea that eco-volunteer programs can be tools of development strategies leading to sustainable development, since they centre the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitors that all benefit from tourism activity “[14]”.

Moreover, volunteer tourism programs, if appropriately planned and managed, can trigger positive processes in the areas where they take place, stimulating both public and private players locally to undertake further and new initiatives following in the wake, thus creating further opportunities for sustainable development. Some concrete results in terms of nature conservation and development of sustainable tourism activities, achieved by CTS (Centre for Student and Youth Tourism) in Italy, are given in the following paragraphs.

2 CTS PROJECTS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF MARINE TURTLES AND CETACEANS

The CTS is an Italian non-profit association founded in 1974 with the aim of promoting cultural exchanges and the mobility of young people and students. In time, CTS has broadened its activities, including nature conservation, environmental education and responsible tourism development among its purposes. In 1992, CTS was acknowledged by the Ministry of Environment as a national association for environment protection; and since 2002 it has also been acknowledged by the Ministry of Labour and Social Matters as one of the primary associations for social promotion and culture. In 2002 CTS founded a

Study Centre to provide an increased understanding of tourism and supporting sustainability in the sector. CTS is also a founding member of AITR (Italian Association for Responsible Tourism) a network of 92 organizations, all working at different levels to promote and increase sustainability in all its dimensions (environmental, economic and social) and to promote awareness and responsibility in the tourism industry. In the past 15 years CTS, pursuant to its activity both as a tourist and environment protection association, has focused on promoting a new "way" in tourism, inspired by the principles of sustainability and respect towards nature, the local communities and cultures of destination areas. The idea was to involve tourists, scientists, travel industry professionals and local authorities in destination areas in the development of conservation and tourism programs in Italy.

Since the early 90s, CTS started resorting volunteer tourism programs as a tool for nature conservation and local development in some small Italian islands: the Pelagian Archipelago MPA (Marine Protected Area) (Sicily), the Archipelago of La Maddalena NP and the Asinara island NP (National Park) (Sardinia). More recent initiatives have been set up in the coastal areas adjoining Brancaleone (Calabria) and Cattolica Eraclea (Sicily) and on the island of Capraia (Toscana) in the Arcipelago Toscano NP.

These are places with high environmental value (presence of Nature 2000 sites, protected areas, endangered species) and tourist value. Going programs focuses on the protection and study of marine turtles and cetaceans (such as the Bottlenose dolphin) which suffer from negative impacts due to fishing and tourist activities.

Initially, funds provided by participant's grants allowed the establishment of basic monitoring and conservation activities only.

Nevertheless, the presence of volunteers had an immediate, positive result on the local population attitude - particularly that of stakeholders such as fishermen - towards turtles and dolphins, thanks to the small-scale economy generated and the enthusi-

asm and commitment of participants to the programme. These pilot schemes then drew the interest and attention of both public bodies and private sponsors, who understood that new opportunities for local development, on a sustainable basis could raise from those experiences. Starting from the year 2000, six notable, long-term projects conceived and planned by CTS with the support of local authorities and Parks Agencies gained loans from the EU Commission (through the Life Nature program), from the Ministry of the Environment, from the Calabria Region, from the Province of Agrigento and from private sponsors (such as Bassetti). This has given conservation programs and research activity more solidity and continuity.

Along the years, starting from pioneering initiatives carried out on a seasonal basis, considerable results were achieved from a scientific, educational and economical point of view, which in order allowed starting new programs and experiences, even in different places. Altogether, the mentioned areas and projects had benefit from 6.864.289 euros since the year 2000, allowing the establishment of two Research Centres on dolphins and cetaceans, four turtle Rescue Centres and one wild fauna Rescue Centre that now act as hubs for either scientific, educational, awareness raising and tourist activities (such as dolphin watching). The Centres give employment to 19 local operators on a regular basis. All Centres have permanent exhibition about the species, regularly visited from tourists. As a matter of fact, along eight years these structures were included in the local tourist offer and counted 143.500 visitors. The projects also drew the interest of mass media; a lot of space was given to the activities of the Centres in papers and television programmes in Italy, thus contributing to the positive image of territories, as places with high value both from an environmental and tourist point of view. In 2007 only, television passages about projects, the Centres and the conservation activities have been 71 and 520 the articles on magazines and newspapers.

On the conservation side, projects results were notable as well. Research activities allowed the definition of Action Plans for the conservation of Loggerhead Turtle and Bottlenose dolphin in the Pelagian Islands; the drawing up of national guidelines to reduce impacts of fishing activities on marine turtles and guidelines for the conservation of Bottlenose dolphin in the Archipelago of La Maddalena NP. Starting from the year 2000, in the Pelagian Islands MPA and La Maddalena NP, 167 resident dolphins have been identified through photo-identification and almost 600 turtles rescued. In the Pelagian Islands, the raising of consensus towards conservation activities and the establishment of the Marine Protected Area, which initially had to face hard opposition from local stakeholders and people, is strongly tied to the process which led to value the presence of turtles as a resource for the community, instead of being considered just an annoying by-catch of fishing activities. In such a process, the presence on the islands of volunteer tourism programs, carried out by CTS and other organizations as well, played a considerable role, leading to the expression "Lampedusa, the island of turtles" adopted by local administration and operators from the tourist sector to promote the island's image. A similar process took place in Brancalione, where thanks to the species conservation efforts carried out by different groups and the establishment of a turtle Rescue Centre by CTS, the coast once known as "Jasmin Coast" is now named after the turtles.

CONCLUSIONS

Until today, local conservation projects on sea turtles and dolphins, launched as pioneering initiatives and carried out on a seasonal basis by CTS thanks to volunteer tourism programs, have acquired national importance and are accomplished with continuity. The projects, involving professionals from different sectors (public administrations, environmental and trade associations, uni-

versities) led to the creation of stable, multifunctional facilities (Dolphin Research and Turtle Rescue Centres) offering research and conservation programs and providing at the same time information, didactic and tourist activities. The most innovative feature of the above-mentioned experiences lies in the fact that tourist projects were created in harmony with scientific projects and were conceived to support and "serve" research. Thanks to this alternative form of tourism, results obtained in research and conservation efforts are coupled with the improvement in terms of environmental education and awareness. A demonstration of this may be found (for instance) in the tourist flows that every summer visit Linosa and Lampedusa Centres (over 20,000 against a population of nearly 5000) and the hundreds of people that every year take part in eco-volunteering camps. Volunteer tourism has also increased awareness of local population about the value of the natural resources of their living environment. Let us also mention the improvements in winning collaboration of local stakeholders such as the fishermen, engaged in minimizing accidental captures of turtles and dolphins, and local schools participation in specially tailored programs (nearly 500 from all over Sicily only during the years 2004 and 2005).

Efforts made by CTS to give birth to positive synergies between conservation projects and tourism, highlight a process characterized by different phases: after an initial "pioneering" stage in which scientific activities were only possible thanks to the financial and practical support from eco-volunteering camps, the programs entered a critical stage. In order to overcome the crisis and allow the activities to progress, it was necessary to prove the private and public sector the potentials and value of the going programs. This fact must not be taken for granted, since similar initiatives undertaken by CTS failed. Reason for this can be found in the lower tourist "appeal" of the species and the areas involved (e.g. wolves and bears in mountainous districts) and different conservation techniques, which made it more difficult to reach a "criti-

cal” mass of participants necessary to reach significant results. However, once the critical stage was overcome, thanks to the effectiveness of strategies undertaken, the programs witnessed significant progresses in terms of quality, strengthening previous initiatives and triggering a development phase which resulted in a general improvement: establishment of new centres, partnerships, projects, research locations and operating modalities.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Ellis, “Participatory Environmental Research in Tourism: A Global View”, *Tourism Recreation Research* 28(3), 2003
 - [2] E.A. Halpenny, L.T. Caissie, “Volunteering on Nature Conservation Projects: Volunteer Experience, Attitudes and Values”, *Tourism Recreation Research* 28(3), 2003
 - [3] K. Lyons, S. Wearing, *Journeys of discovery in volunteer tourism: International case study perspectives*, CABI, Wallingford, UK, 2008
 - [4] N.G. McGehee, C. A. Santos, “Social change, discourse and volunteer tourism”, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Volume 32, Issue 3, July, Pages 760-779, 2005
 - [5] N.G. McGehee, “Volunteer Tourism and Social Movement Participation”. *Annals of Tourism Research* 29, 124-143, 2002
 - [6] H. Stoddart, C. Rogerson, “Volunteer Tourism: The Case of Habitat for Humanity South Africa”. *GeoJournal*. 60, 311-318, 2004
 - [7] N. Uriely, A. Reichel, A. Ron, “Volunteering in tourism: Additional thinking”, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 28 (3), 57–62, 2003
 - [8] S. Wearing, A. Deville, K. Lyons, “The volunteer’s journey through leisure to the self”, in K.D. Lyons and S. Wearing (Eds.) *Journeys of discovery in volunteer tourism: International case study perspectives*, pp. 63 - 71, CABI, Wallingford, UK, 2008
 - [9] S. Wearing, M. McDonald, J. Ponting, “Decommodifying tourism: the contribution of non-governmental organisations”, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 13, 5, pp. 422 - 424, 0966-9582, Channel View, Clevedon, UK, 2005
 - [10] S. Wearing, B. Deane, “Seeking Self: Leisure and Tourism on Common Ground”. *World Leisure Journal* 45, 4-12, 2003
 - [11] S. Wearing, “Re-centering the Self in Volunteer Tourism”, in G. Dann (ed.) *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World*. CABI Publishing, Wallingford, pp. 237-262, 2002
 - [12] S. Wearing, “The Development of Community-based Tourism: Re-thinking the relationship between Tour Operators and Development Agents as Intermediaries in Rural and Isolated Area Communities”, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 10, 3, pp. 191 - 206, Channel View Publications, Clevedon, UK, 2002
 - [13] S. Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Challenging Consumerism in Tourism, Environmental Awareness*, 24, 3, pp. 99 – 106, 2001
 - [14] S. Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism: Experiences That Make a Difference*. CABI Publishing, Wallingford, 2001
 - [15] S. Wearing, “Refiguring Self and Identity through Volunteer Tourism”. *Loisir et Societe* 23, 389-419, 2000
- Micaela Solinas** is head of Sustainable Tourism and Protected Areas Dept. of CTS, Rome. She is specialized in the planning and managing of projects and researches to promote a sustainable and responsible development of tourism.
- Simona Clò**, PhD in Biology, is head of the Nature Conservation Dept. of CTS, Rome, and Mediterranean representative for the IUCN Sharks Specialist Group. Since 1994 she dedicated all her scientific career to sharks and marine protected species.
- Manuela Nicosia** is consulting sociologist and PhD candidate in Methodology of social research. Work experienced in sustainable tourism programmes and social surveys on environmental and tourism issues.