

Leisure and Obligation: An Investigation of Volunteer Tourists’ Experience at Kenya’s Taita Discovery Center

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Abstract

This research used qualitative methods to examine the relationship between leisure and obligation among volunteer tourists on holiday at Kenya’s Taita Discovery Center (TDC). At TDC, volunteer tourists spend their days participating in either a wildlife conservation program or a community development program. These programs are largely dependent on volunteer support. As a result, each volunteer interviewed described feeling a strong sense of obligation. Nevertheless, volunteers described their experience as leisure rather than work. Analysis revealed six characteristics of obligation which, in this case, made it agreeable to leisure. These characteristics are illustrated with quotes from the data and a brief discussion that follows.

KEYWORDS: Leisure, obligation, perceived freedom, volunteering, volunteer tourism

Introduction

The relationship between obligation and leisure is complex. Research shows obligation can facilitate leisure (Gibson, Willming, Holdnak, 2002; Glover, Parry & Shinew, 2005; Laverie, 1998; Maguire, 2008; Mannel, Zuzanek & Larson, 1988) and at other times impede it (Davidson, 1996; Dupuis, 2000; Shaw, 1992). Obligation as an impediment to leisure is rooted in classical Greek notions of leisure that give prominence to perceived freedom (Goodale & Godbey, 1988). It follows from this that obligation to participate in a particular activity diminishes the perception of freedom and therefore leisure. Evidence of this is found in the writings of several prominent leisure theorists. For example, Dumazedier (1967) called non-work obligations that individuals may have to friends, family or strongly felt causes “semi-leisure.” The inference is that obligation creates a non-work condition, which is somehow less than leisure. Kelly (1972) characterized “unconditional leisure,” or the purest most deeply satisfying form of leisure, as free from obligation. Iso-Ahola (1972), Neulinger (1981) and Parker (1983) all conceptualized leisure, in part, as time free from obligation. More recently, Iso-Ahola (1999) wrote that in leisure “there are no internal or external pressures or

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coercion to engage” (p. 39), thus illustrating the potential for divergence between leisure and obligation.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, as characterized by the research of Shaw (1985), subjective definitions of leisure became prominent. Leisure when subjectively defined allows for the possibility of obligation playing a meaningful role in the experience. Shaw (1985) discovered that respondents in her study perceived some degree of obligation in nearly half of all situations subjectively defined as leisure. In support of this, Lee, Dattilo and Howard (1994) found the leisure experience to be more complex than previously recognized. Their research found that individual perceptions of leisure could include stress, apprehension, nervousness, guilt and even disappointment. Considering this, it seems possible that individuals will also perceive obligation as part of the leisure experience. In view of that, Maguire (2008) argues that within the context of contemporary consumer society, obligation increasingly shapes the experience of leisure. Specifically, consumer society valorizes productivity. Thus, individuals feel obligated to be productive, even during leisure. This sense of obligation leads individuals to commercial fitness centers where they display their productivity by working towards the “perfect body.” Yet, there is evidence that obligation can contribute much more to leisure than socially motivated self-production. For example, Mannel, Zuzanek and Larson (1988) found that high levels of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) can be experienced in leisure activities characterized by commitment and obligation. This suggests that obligation might actually contribute to optimal leisure experiences.

Robert Stebbins found this to be true throughout his work on amateurs, volunteers and serious leisure. Writing in his book *Amateurs*, Stebbins (1979) observed that participants in amateur theater are obligated to come to practice, memorize lines, overcome stage fright and participate in all scheduled performances. Stebbins made similar observations of amateur baseball players and archeologists. In each case, respondents described feeling obligated to their pursuits. That is, they felt required to do them and other demands on their time would have to wait. Nevertheless, participants described these pursuits as leisure not work. Furthermore, these pursuits were deeply satisfying and often transformative. As Stebbins would later note (1992), some obligations may be necessary for fulfillment in leisure. Indeed, some participants recognized particular obligations as necessary for their own well being or the well being of their community. Knowing this, they freely chose their obligations. Glover, Parry and Shinew (2005) came to similar conclusions in their study on leisure, community gardens and social capital. Reflecting on this, Stebbins (2000) suggested obligation be thought of as either agreeable or disagreeable. Agreeable obligation indicates positive attachment to an activity and is associated with pleasant expectations. Furthermore, agreeable obligation is flexible in that participants have the option to quit at some point in the near future. Thus, there is a relative freedom associated with agreeable obligation. To the contrary, disagreeable obligation is the antithesis of leisure. It is not flexible, giving a participant little choice but to continue, and it is not associated with pleasant expectations. It was agreeable obligation that Stebbins (2000) had in mind when he wrote, “leisure activities occasionally or frequently have an obligatory side that some participants nonetheless experience as part of leisure” (p. 152). Thus, wrote Stebbins, “examination of particular leisure activities should include a look at the nature and scope of agreeable obligation” (p. 155). In response, the study at hand examines the

nature of obligation as it relates to the leisure experience of volunteer tourists on holiday at Kenya's Taita Discovery Center (TDC).

Setting and Method

Taita Discovery Center is located in southeast Kenya between Tsavo East and Tsavo West National Parks (Origins Safaris, 2008). Both parks provide ample habitat for an abundance of wildlife. However, due to the arid climate, wildlife commonly migrates from one park to the next following seasonal patterns of rain and drought. The migration takes the wildlife across a matrix of private and communal land. This land is home to approximately 12,000 people, mostly subsistence farmers and ranchers, who also depend on the arid environments' meager offerings. Because of this, it is not uncommon for local people to find themselves in competition with the area's wildlife. Herbivores as large as elephants and as numerous as baboons occasionally raid farmers' crops; meanwhile, predators like lions, hyenas and leopards sometimes attack livestock. Certainly, this diminishes the appeal of wildlife conservation from the perspective of most local people and makes protecting the migration route a tremendous challenge. Yet it is this challenge that TDC is undertaking. Importantly, TDC recognizes conservation is as much a social as an ecological process. In other words, local people must be supportive of and involved with any conservation effort for it to succeed. Therefore, TDC's approach to conservation focuses on community development and environmental education in addition to conservation biology.

Taita Discovery Center pursues its goal of protecting the migration route almost entirely through the efforts of volunteer tourists. In his seminal book on the subject, Wearing (2001) defined volunteer tourists as those who "volunteer in an organized way to undertake a holiday that involves aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society or the restoration of certain environments" (p. 1). Taita Discovery Center asks its volunteers to commit to one of two programs: a science based wildlife conservation program or a community development program. The wildlife volunteers stay at TDC's headquarters and collect scientific data in order to understand how wildlife uses the proposed conservation area. The community volunteers stay in local villages and lend their expertise and labor to a variety of important development projects. In a given year, TDC facilitates roughly 40 wildlife volunteers and 15 community volunteers. Most of TDC's volunteer tourists participate from one to three months and accept many work-like obligations as part of their experience. For example, wildlife volunteers must regularly awake at 4 am to track the movements of radio-collared lions and in the afternoons, sit silently for hours monitoring wildlife usage of watering holes – even when no wildlife is present. In addition, wildlife volunteers must systematically and accurately record field data and enter them into TDC's computer database. Community volunteers obligate themselves to various development projects such as improving schools, health clinics and libraries; training teachers; and promoting various educational campaigns. Thus, in the case of TDC, there is ample evidence to suggest obligation is at the center of what is fundamentally a leisure experience. The purpose of this research was to explore the volunteer tourists' perceptions of obligation and leisure inherent in a TDC holiday.

Research was conducted for two and half weeks during the summer of 2006. Formal interviews and informal conversation were the primary methods of data col-

lection. All volunteers present at the time of the study were interviewed (four community and three wildlife volunteers for a total of seven). All volunteers were young adults and arrived in Kenya from Canada, France, Denmark, Belgium and Japan. Three were university students, one was a recent university graduate, and three were working professionals. Five were female and two were male. Interviews were formal yet "active" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Active interviewing is a technique likened to a conversation. Rather than reading from a list of questions, the researcher guides a conversation through topics of interest. For this research, topics included whether volunteers considered their experience at TDC to be leisure, whether they felt a sense of obligation at TDC, and their experience of obligation. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed. Numerous informal conversations with volunteers were recorded in a field notebook and elaborated upon in a journal later that same day. All data were analyzed with the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Names have been omitted to protect anonymity.

Results

Each participant considered their TDC experience to be leisure rather than work. Yet in the interviews, each participant reported feeling a sense of obligation towards TDC and the projects in which they participated. This obligation was observed by the researcher on a daily basis during the interview period. For example, after lunch one afternoon a wildlife volunteer exclaimed, "I am so tired." To which the researcher replied, "Take a nap." "Oh no," said the volunteer, "I have so much to do. I have to enter all this field data in the computer." "Are you enjoying yourself?" the researcher then asked. "Oh yes!" came the reply, "This is a once in a lifetime experience!" As this dialogue illustrates, participants felt a strong sense of obligation to their projects, yet this obligation did not prevent enjoyment. Not surprisingly, analysis of the data revealed that each volunteer described the obligations experienced at TDC in terms similar to Stebbins (2000) description of "agreeable obligation." Never once did a volunteer describe the obligations experienced at TDC in terms similar to Stebbins (2000) description of "disagreeable obligation." In particular, obligations were described as agreeable because they (1) were freely chosen and volunteers were not coerced in any way, (2) allowed the volunteers to differentiate themselves from traditional tourists, (3) occurred in novel physical and social settings, (4) were directly related to global causes about which the volunteers felt strongly, (5) were enjoyable, and (6) were perceived as free from evaluation. These characteristics are illustrated with quotes from the data below.

All seven of the volunteers felt as if the obligations at TDC were freely chosen. There was no coercion involved and for that reason the obligation was agreeable. For example, in reference to her obligations to an HIV awareness group, a community volunteer said, "The experience is very great. I am having fun. I just decided to do it myself. Nobody forced me." Likewise, when asked if she still has a sense of freedom despite her obligations, another volunteer replied, "I do and I need that because I am really not good at being forced to do anything ... and I don't feel like that when volunteering. It is leisure in that sense. I choose to volunteer." Importantly, this relative freedom of choice enabled volunteers to set and enforce the boundary between agreeable and disagreeable obligation. For example, a community volunteer with work ex-

perience in computers was asked to teach local people about computing. He refused, stating that was too similar to what he does for a living (and was thus disagreeable). Instead, he chose projects requiring manual labor and enjoyed the physical exertion.

Research by Wearing (2001) found that volunteer tourists are often reluctant to identify themselves as traditional tourists. This was true of all seven of the volunteer tourists interviewed at TDC. As a wildlife volunteer explained, "I don't like touristic things so I didn't want to do a safari—just driving around in a car taking pictures and then going back home." Importantly, each volunteer identified their obligations to wildlife conservation or community development as what distinguished them from traditional tourists. For example, a young wildlife volunteer explained, "I wanted to go to Kenya and I wanted to see animals not like a tourist but I wanted to have a part in the work of the guides." Another volunteer appeared to desire even more obligation than what TDC required in order to not feel like a tourist. She confessed, "Sometimes I still feel like a tourist. That's why I help the cooks in the kitchen. I don't want to feel like a guest." This suggests that obligation might actually be a necessary and desired component of some leisure experiences. In the case of volunteer tourism, it helps volunteer tourists differentiate their experiences from those of traditional tourists.

The novel physical and social settings of TDC influenced all volunteers' perception of obligation by making it seem more agreeable. For instance, wildlife volunteers looked forward to the midday waterhole monitoring required of them even though there was often no wildlife to monitor during the heat of day. The reason was the pleasant expectation that they would see something they had never seen before—even if it was only a unique landscape. The novel social setting made obligation agreeable as well. After returning from the waterhole and faced with the task of computer data entry, a wildlife volunteer explained, "It is an obligation but I will do it and it is not a problem because there is an exchange taking place. We are here together, I am from France, I speak about my country, African people speak about their country. It is an exchange." Likewise, a community volunteer explained her willingness to help out at a local school saying, "it would be a job at home but not in a different country." Previous research indicates the importance of novelty for tourism. Cohen (1972) identified novelty as the primary motivator for particular types of tourists. Novelty allows tourists to escape the perceived mundane settings and routines of their daily lives (Cohen & Taylor, 1992; Crompton, 1979). Similarly, at TDC, novelty contributes to the experience of agreeable obligation.

Five of the seven TDC volunteers perceived that their obligations at TDC were related to larger causes they have always supported and believed in. This made the TDC obligation more agreeable. One volunteer expressed having always felt a deep obligation to African development because her father was born on the continent. She explained, "I have always tried to help and contribute to Africa, it is in my blood." Another volunteer with a history of working on HIV related causes stated "I always wanted to come to Africa because this continent really suffers from HIV ... HIV is such a terrible disease and people get so sick and so many people die that I want to help and Africa is definitely a place that needs help." Another volunteer, who has studied international development in the US and Japan and has previously traveled to Thailand and Cambodia as a volunteer tourist, explained, "I have always been very interested in international development." Likewise, two wildlife volunteers expressed a "lifelong

love” for animals. It is likely that these volunteer tourists’ long term and deeply felt commitment to particular causes contributes significantly to their personal identity (Stebbins, 1992). Therefore, by accepting obligation at TDC, they are affirming important aspects of who they are. This makes the experience agreeable. Gibson et al. (2002) identified the same phenomenon in their study of highly committed college football fans.

While the overall TDC experience was highly enjoyable for all volunteers, five of the seven actually described obligation with terms similar to enjoyment. A wildlife volunteer relished her time away from the responsibilities of her career saying, “My obligations here are enjoyable because I don’t decide anything. [TDC] decides what I do and I just do it. This is a freedom for me and I enjoy it.” Another wildlife volunteer, while collecting field data, saw a giraffe for the first time and had this to say about the experience, “I couldn’t know that feeling another way – it was amazing, it was beautiful.” A community volunteer even described a flow-like condition saying, “Sometimes I feel like this volunteer work is hard and I would rather do other things like go to a park but then I get totally consumed by it ... I find myself saying ‘whoa’ where did that three hours go?” Indeed, transformation of time is an aspect of highly enjoyable experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Lastly, one volunteer described obligation as agreeable because it was free from evaluation, “There is no stress, there is no one looking over my shoulder, there is no one telling me I am not working fast enough.” Research by Shaw (1985) found that feeling free from evaluation is indicative of the leisure experience while perceived evaluation is indicative of non-leisure experiences. As Shaw explained, perceived evaluation is associated with labor-market and other obligatory activities. More specifically, Stebbins (2000) suggested that perceived evaluation is associated with disagreeable obligation. Thus, the experience of obligation and the experience of leisure may at times share some common ground.

Conclusion

Taita Discovery Center’s volunteer tourists described their experience as deeply beneficial and transformative. Indeed, TDC provides evidence of leisure’s full potential. Research by Lepp (2008) showed a TDC holiday fosters both inter and intra personal growth and development among participants. Yet, the TDC holiday includes a strong sense of obligation, and obligation can at times be an impediment to leisure (Davidson, 1996; Dupuis, 2000; Shaw, 1992). Clearly, obligation was not an impediment to leisure at TDC. Stebbins (1992) was among the first to recognize the importance of obligation for some forms of deeply meaningful leisure. He described leisure-friendly obligation as “agreeable” (2000). This research has probed the nature of agreeable obligation and, like Stebbins initial description, found it to be perceived as freely chosen and not coerced, flexible, and associated with pleasant expectations. Notably, this research has found additional complexity in the nature of agreeable obligation. Among this sample, participants found obligations agreeable if they related to a larger environmental or social cause the participant had always supported, when they occurred in novel settings, and if perceived as free from evaluation. Finally, it appears that some aspects of agreeable obligation may be specific to particular leisure endeavors. In this sample of volunteer tourists, obligations were agreeable because

they distinguished the volunteers from more traditional tourists, making the obligations desirable due to the unique status they impart upon the participant. In summary, this research answers Stebbins' call for further examination of the "nature and scope of agreeable obligation" (2000, p. 155). In addition, it contributes to a growing understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of the leisure experience (Lee, Dattilo & Howard, 1994). From a practical standpoint, this research is particularly relevant for managers of volunteer programs as an improved understanding of agreeable obligation has immediate applications in volunteer recruitment and retention.

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