



Paid volunteering, sometimes called voluntouring, where you pay to volunteer your time, is a popular activity the world over and has its benefits that include providing much needed human resources for various projects that could include conservation projects. However, has volunteering become nothing more than a profit-driven exercise? *Text: Kathy Gill and Dr Matthias Hammer of Biosphere Expeditions*

The truth about volunteering



There is a strong tradition of volunteers leading the way in conservation all over the world. The modern development of land areas protected for conservation came about through the determination of people who were not paid to do it. Volunteers led the way in setting up societies and clubs to protect fauna and flora and in the process some of these organisations became some of the world's largest conservation bodies.

Environmental history in the 19th and 20th century saw the emergence of a rural economic 'Third Force' in addition to farming and forestry. The National Trust in the UK is a good example of an organisation that came about as part of this 'Third Force'. Later on came other nationwide organisations such as the Wild Fowl and Wetland Trust, founded in 1946, and the Wildlife Trust, founded in 1972.

Conservation volunteering started in the 1980s with small organisations, such as Operation Raleigh in the UK and Earthwatch in the USA, taking untrained people to learn about and undertake conservation work abroad. The early organisations were from North American or Western Europe, as were the volunteers and they mostly went to developing countries. The number of organisations swelled from early in the 21st century until the current status quo was arrived at – a plethora of organisations with a dazzling array of opportunities for those wanting to what become known as 'volunteer' abroad.



Projects are not confined to conservation - you can do anything from looking after orphaned animals, to teaching English, building walls and undertaking diving surveys.

When Biosphere Expeditions started in 1999, volunteering was the domain of charities and NGOs. Now it is a multi-million dollar business and there are far too many projects that have more to do with a petting zoo than conservation. Some organisations care about the impact that they have and others seem only to care about taking

people's money and giving the volunteers an experience.

Volunteering has come under strong criticism, being painted a money-making enterprise that either panders to wealthy volunteers or exploits them and the communities in which they volunteer. So, how does one assess an organisation and find the right project that makes a difference that you gain from meaningful and ultimately contribute to a better world. Biosphere has compiled 10 top tips to use when assessing volunteer projects. **W**

FACT TRACKER

Biosphere Expeditions

About: Biosphere Expeditions A multi-award-winning non-profit organisation that rejects the pursuit of economic growth and runs all expeditions on a vegetarian basis to reduce impact. Expenditures and research results are published each year and the organisation guarantees – and shows – that at least two-thirds of all expedition contributions that participants pay into the project are invested back into that project.

Cost: Contributions vary from R10 000 upwards depending on the duration and the destination. Flights to the expedition country are extra. There are no special skills required to join an expedition (other than a diving qualification for the reef surveys) and there are no age limits. Most participants are between 30 and 60, and join projects for one or two weeks, though longer participation is possible

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www.biosphere-expeditions.org/southafrica

EXPEDITIONS

A tiger conservation project on the Indonesian island of Sumatra (www.biosphere-expeditions.org/sumatra) to survey critically endangered Sumatran tigers and the rainforest setting in which they are struggling to survive. Participants work as part of an international team from a comfortable timber house inside the forest, covering ground on foot, in boats and on motorbikes, looking for tracks, kills, scats and the animals themselves, and setting camera traps.

Snow Leopards. Another project in the high mountains of the Tien Shan in Kyrgyzstan survey snow leopards (www.biosphere-expeditions.org/tianshan) from a mobile tented base camp set at locations and altitudes of around 3000 m. True expedition-style base camp conditions, testing but satisfying mountain surveying, off road driving, and variable mountain weather, make this their most challenging expedition.

TOP TEN TIPS

1 Reputation. Find out about the organisation. Related awards and or accolades can be an indicator while it is also important to find out who are they associated with, what is their philosophy, do they write and publish their results and what's their safety record.

2 Qualified staff. Work should be led by qualified and experienced employees at all times.

3 Where does your money go? Good organisations will always publish clear information that shows how your money is spent. You should ask for annual reports and even what percentage of income is ploughed back.

4 Proper follow-through. A good organisation will, through updates and reports, keep you informed about how

the project progresses even after you've left.

5 What will you get out of it? Be clear about what you want to get out of the experience - training, self-development, an adventure? Then check whether the organisation is clear in communicating what's on offer for you.

6 Community involvement and benefit. Understand a project's relationship with the local community and make sure that the organisation is properly embedded with local efforts and people. Ask how the community benefits, if they have they given consent for work to be carried out and ask how the community have been involved. As an example is there training for locals, scholarships, capacity-build-ing, education, etc.

7 Your fellow participants. Understand the profile of the people that will share your trip by checking the organisation's website and social media sites.

8 In the field. Check that the organisation is transparent about what will be happening day to day, the accommodation, food and other logistics, and also what is expected of you.

9 Captive animals. If the experience involves captive animals, be extremely clear on the purpose of the captive facility, where the animals come from and whether it is part of a reputable programme.

10 Handling animals. Steer clear of organisations that encourage handling of captive wild animals for anything other than essential veterinary or neo-natal surrogate care.