

A man with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a pink button-down shirt, is gently holding the head of a cheetah. The cheetah is lying down, and its distinctive spotted fur is clearly visible. The background is a blurred savannah landscape with trees and a clear sky. The text '01 International Volunteering: an Overview' is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

01 International Volunteering: an Overview

'Time is money.' How often have you heard that said? Perhaps it came to mind as you spent yet another late night in the office trying to meet a deadline; or perhaps you work in a profession where your time is billed in blocks of 15 minutes. Maybe you've just retired, having worked hard for years in return for an annual salary. Unless you're a professional parent, the chances are you're used to being paid for the work you do. And, whatever your circumstances, you probably consider your time a precious commodity.

So, why give your time for free? Or, as is the case with the majority of international volunteering opportunities, why pay for the privilege of working for nothing? This chapter offers a broad cross-section of answers to these questions.

'Think globally, act locally' was a phrase coined in 1972 by René Dubos, an adviser to the UN Conference on the Human Environment. Although the phrase initially referred to looking after our environment, it touched a global nerve and came to mean acting locally in any worthwhile capacity. Then, 12 years later, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure formed Band Aid and challenged the world not only to 'think' globally but 'act' globally as well, and raised money for famine relief in Ethiopia. Whatever you think of this campaign (and subsequent ones such as Make Poverty History), the actions of Geldof and Ure ignited high-level debate about world inequality. The ongoing efforts of many ensure that such imbalances are kept in the global media spotlight.

Buying white wristbands and donating money from the comfort of your lounge room to send abroad is one thing. Actually giving up your time and going to a poorer part of the world to contribute your knowledge, skills or labour is quite another. But this is exactly what an increasing number of people around the globe are choosing to do with their holidays, during gap years, on career breaks or upon retirement.

However, the more popular international volunteering becomes, the more difficult it is to pinpoint where to go, what to do and which organisation you want to volunteer with. For starters, the sheer number of volunteering opportunities today can be overwhelming. Then there's the problem that not all volunteering is good volunteering. There are plenty of volunteer organisations that are not meeting or responding to local needs, not working in proper partnership with host communities and certainly not working towards sustainable solutions. And, let's face it, no-one wants to become that volunteer who has just built a bridge where no bridge was needed.

Volunteering abroad should be the best thing you've ever done, but the onus is on you to act responsibly, do the research and find a volunteer programme that works both for you and for the host community. This book aims to equip you with all the tools to do just that.

One volunteer, Linda Walsh, who worked with street children in Rio de Janeiro for Task Brasil (p170), urges:

Go and volunteer. Love the experience, even when there are times when you feel unappreciated, tired, fed up or lost with the language. No matter what, if you throw yourself wholeheartedly into it you will love it and it will do more for you than you could ever imagine.

As Clodagh O'Brien, who volunteered in Borneo with the Orangutan Foundation UK (p175), succinctly puts it:

Every insect bite, cut, argument and awful bus journey was well worth it.

Why Volunteer?

This is a good question and one you need to think very carefully about. The most common reason to volunteer is the desire to 'give something back'. Vikki Cole, who volunteered on an environmental project with Trekforce (p115) in Borneo, explains:

Without sounding clichéd, I really wanted to be able to look back on my life and to have done something of substance that didn't directly benefit just me.

Jacqueline Hill, who volunteered with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO, p94) building management capacity with local NGOs in Bangladesh, had similar feelings:

It had been a long-term dream. I had a vague plan that I'd spend the first 20 years of my career earning for myself and the next 20 giving something back.

Wanting to help others, wishing to do good and hoping to make a difference are all important reasons to volunteer. But nine times out of ten, they're not enough to make you to feel that your time was well spent: there need to be other reasons. And, as you can imagine, there are plenty to choose from. Mike Laird, who travelled with the Scientific Exploration Society (p136) to work on scientific, archaeological and community-aid projects in Bolivia, lists a well-balanced mix of altruistic and personal motivations for volunteering:

To see the delight on people's faces when they realise they now have a clean and safe water supply or better school facilities. To know that they will benefit from these for years to come. The personal benefits are almost too many to mention: being exposed to new cultures; seeing new places and sharing in great experiences; making new and lasting friendships and discovering a bit more about myself. That apart, I also got fitter, lost weight and felt terrific when I came home.

Mike picks up on a key point for travellers – volunteering is an excellent way to get under the skin of a country and come to grips with a different culture. The cultural-exchange

Is International Volunteering the New Colonialism?

The question of whether volunteering is the new colonialism gets asked a lot, and the short answers are: 'yes', 'no', 'sometimes' and 'maybe'. International volunteering is part of a long tradition of people from the West setting off to help or change the countries of the Global South (aka the developing world) and have adventures while they do it. Where once these people were missionaries and soldiers, colonialists and explorers, teachers and entrepreneurs – now they are international volunteers.

If volunteers travel in the belief that they have little to learn and a lot to give, then they do risk being little more than 'New Age colonialists'. No-one becomes an international volunteer for purely altruistic reasons: they also do it because it is exciting, because they might learn something, because they want to meet new people who live differently and because, just maybe, they might have something to offer. By acknowledging why you volunteer, you are telling our hosts that they are people you can learn from and with, not that they should be the grateful recipients of your altruism. You ask them to be your teachers, instead of forcing them to be your students.

So, whether international volunteering is the new colonialism or not is, in large part, down to the attitudes of you, the volunteer, and the organisation you go with. If you don't want to be a 21st-century colonialist, rule out organisations that suggest you'll be 'saving the world' or give a patronising image of the developing world. Then question yourself. Be open about why you want to be an international volunteer and what you have to learn from those you visit. Avoiding being patronising will take some effort and research, and will require getting rid of many of the usual preconceptions about the developing world.

For more information, look at the Volunteer Charter at www.volunteeringoptions.org.

Dr Kate Simpson

element of international volunteering is a key part of what both you and your hosts will get out of the whole experience. Plus, you can build volunteering into almost any segment of your travels, whether you decide to arrange it formally or just turn up and find a placement yourself (see p215).

The educational aspect of volunteering is equally crucial. In almost every placement you'll have the opportunity to learn a foreign language or to brush up on one. And many of the new skills you'll acquire or develop can be used back home in your profession. Recognising that transferable skills can be gained while volunteering, the global management consulting group Accenture was one of the first companies to sign up to VSO's Business Partnership Scheme. Accenture spokesperson Gib Bulloch elaborates:

Volunteering with VSO allows staff to hone their leadership and communication skills. Often working in environments where they need to coach or influence people, they also develop key listening and understanding skills. Plus, volunteering abroad means that staff can add 'overseas work experience' to their CV – so crucial these days if you want to progress within an organisation.

Ben Keedwell, who volunteered with Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP, p158) developing a visitor and community centre in a national park, agrees wholeheartedly and goes even further:

International volunteering helps to increase understanding of development issues, consolidate practical skills, and gain first-hand experience of working in the field. Volunteers can develop self-confidence, focus their career objectives and show adaptability, self-motivation and dedication. All of these benefits can kick-start a career and can sometimes be more valuable than undergraduate (or even postgraduate) education.

Many volunteers have found that international volunteering has either helped their career or given them the necessary experience to change careers. For instance, Ann Noon wanted to switch from working in tourism to the charity sector. She volunteered as a press and

marketing manager for the Inka Porter Project (no longer running), and says:

If I'd not gone to Peru, I almost certainly wouldn't have got the job I have today with Sightsavers International, a charity that works to combat blindness in developing countries. I am convinced that I did the right thing, even though it all seemed like a leap into the unknown at the time.

Similarly, Amanda Allen-Toland, an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD, p112) with the Thailand Business Coalition on AIDS in Bangkok, could not have predicted the positive impact her volunteering experience would have on her career. She is now working as a programme manager for the Asia Pacific Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS in Melbourne, Australia. She explains:

It's paid dividends for me. I'm in an area I want to be in with a higher level of responsibility, excellent pay and job satisfaction. It's the icing on the cake. My experience working with TBCA and living in Thailand was so fantastic that even if my next role had been making fruit shakes, I'd do it all over again.

Kinds of International Volunteering

There are thousands of volunteer opportunities around the world and a number of different approaches to getting involved. The rest of this chapter offers an overview of what's out there. Detailed listings of recommended volunteer organisations are provided in Chapters 5 to 8, according to what they offer. If you're after something completely different, read Chapter 10 on how to set up your own grassroots charity.

Areas of Work

What tasks you perform as an international volunteer depends both on what you want to do, and on what is needed by the community or environment where you're going.

Within this framework you've got a number of broad choices, shown in the diagram on p12. The first choice is whether you want to work with people (usually called 'development volunteering') or with the environment and animals (referred to as 'conservation and wildlife volunteering').

Once you've made that basic choice, decide whether you consider yourself a skilled or unskilled volunteer. This is not as straightforward as it sounds. Skilled volunteers are often people such as teachers, accountants, civil engineers or nurses who work in their professions abroad. However, everyone has skills to offer: a parent might be skilled in conflict resolution, or a university graduate in acting and drama. In the final analysis, being skilled or unskilled will not necessarily dictate what area you work in, but it will impact on the level of responsibility you're given.

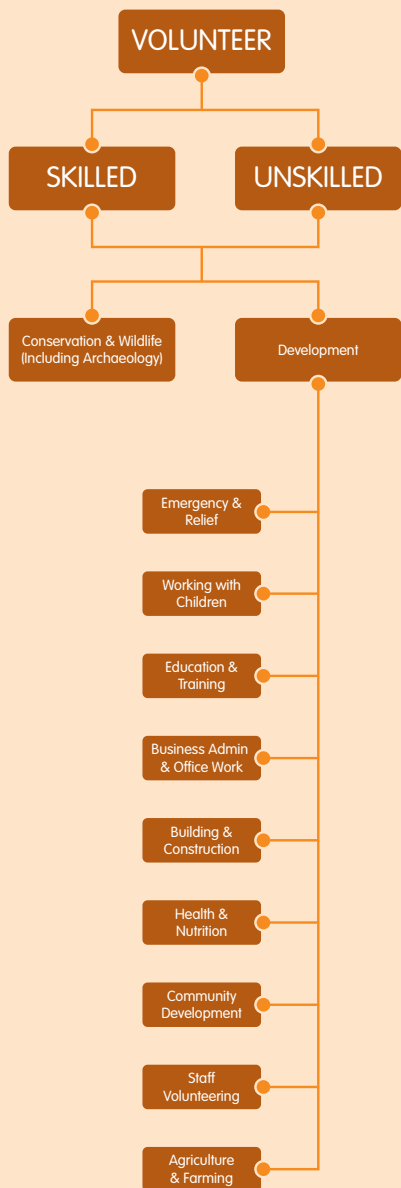
Whatever you decide, it's wise to be prepared for your role to change or develop. You might apply to do something, then find that something rather different is required of you once you reach your placement.

Development Volunteering

There are nine main areas within the development volunteering sector:

- ~ **Emergency and relief** An option for highly skilled and experienced volunteers only, this is where doctors, nurses, midwives, psychologists and so on, respond to humanitarian crises, conflicts, wars and natural disasters abroad (see p142). Some volunteers are on 72-hour standby to go anywhere in the world. Many of the organisations working in this sector have longer-term volunteer opportunities for skilled non-medical staff, such as logisticians or administrators.
- ~ **Working with children** Typically, work in this area might include volunteering as a sports coach, working in an orphanage or with street children. Rachel Oxberry arranged

Kinds of Volunteer Work



her own placements (for information on how to do this, see Chapter 8) in two orphanages in Ecuador and remembers:

I worked in a home looking after 20 children who were either abandoned or orphaned. I thought I was going there to help out generally and teach English but I actually took on the role of 'mother' too, trying to teach routine and discipline as well as doing the cleaning and laundry. I also coached sports, taught drawing and played games with the kids. I volunteered in an orphanage for children with special needs as well. I looked after babies under the age of one, preparing their food, feeding them, changing nappies and doing baby massage.

~ **Education and training** Most volunteer placements in this category are teaching English (with or without qualifications) in preschools and primary or secondary schools, although teaching adults is also common. Depending on your talents or qualifications, however, you could end up teaching almost anything. Sarah Turton volunteered with the Junior Art Club (p182) in Ghana and taught English along with art and photography. This is how she describes her time there:

Sometimes I had over 40 students crammed into a classroom designed for much less. Some of them would stroll in half an hour before the end of class or not turn up for weeks at a time and then expect to pick up where they left off. This was the way it had to be for students where farming and helping sell came first, and I had to develop a flexible teaching style. It was very tough at first and exhausted me but I loved every single second of my time there.

~ **Business administration and office work** Depending on your experience, you might work for a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) writing fundraising proposals, managing a project or volunteering in their