

The Potential of Voluntourism in Central Finland

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Abstract: Voluntourism is a relatively new type of tourism considered to contribute to the sustainability of the industry because of its ties to the local community and the destination. In recent years, with the strong impact of covid-19 crisis on the travel economy new practices and directions of tourism development were driven, and the requirement for sustainability has been emphasized. This research investigates the question: What is the potential for voluntourism in the province of Central Finland? Three studies were conducted. Firstly, existing secondary data was investigated, such as online reviews, blogs and media articles regarding voluntourism in Finland. Secondly, a questionnaire was conducted, which targeted municipality actors, such as mayors, business representatives, as well as regional developers and Leader local action groups, rural entrepreneurs, farm owners, village associations and other parties of interest. Thirdly, theme interviews were conducted with key actors about their current activity and interest in voluntourism to discover examples of existing uncoordinated voluntourism activity in the region. The results, which regard the identification of the voluntourism term, the existing concepts in Finland and the activity in Central Finland, revealed both opportunities and challenges. The term is unknown, and it does not cover all the activity that could be developed in Central Finland. The need is evident for multifaced and complex networking, as well as for the planning and funding of concrete piloting actions of voluntourism in the province. The data gathered could also be applied to the building of a national operating model of voluntourism. This study is a part of “The Value Project: Central Finland as a Leading Province for Volunteer Tourism”, which is implemented in cooperation between Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and Central Finland Villages Association, and co-funded by the European Union.

Keywords: voluntourism, sustainable tourism, live-like-a-local, Central Finland

1. Introduction

There has been relatively little research on volunteer tourism in Finland, but a few studies have shown that there is interest towards volunteering. Internationally, volunteer trips are widely offered and there is a variety of themes. Voluntary tourism in Finland exists, but there is probably more demand than supply. (Kangas & Heinonen, 2011; Konu et al 2017.) The purpose of this research is to investigate the potential of voluntourism in the region of Central Finland, starting from observing the phenomenon on a global level, in order later to identify the existing elements of voluntourism locally and the potential for further development in the region.

1.1 Defining voluntourism

According to Wearing (2001), voluntourism describes a form of tourism in which people visit and participate in local projects, usually related to nature, the local community, or the restoration of buildings and objects. In other words, voluntourism has two faces - travel and volunteering, vacation and work. According to the Finnish Tax Administration, volunteering is unpaid, temporary and does not require professional skills (Sademies & Kostainen 2014). From the tour operator’s perspective, voluntourism is defined as a purchasable trip during which is possible to volunteer (Brown 2005). In non-scientific literature there is a range of interpretations of the term voluntourism. Some parties perceive it only as an international activity (Serve the World Today, n.d.), although covid-19 has clearly revealed its domestic dimensions (Gharib 2021). Others distinguish it from volunteering in terms of duration, with voluntourism being the short-term activity (Scott 2021). Also, it is acknowledged that in volunteering the purpose of travelling is the volunteering activity without any tourism-driven motivation, while in voluntourism there is a combination of volunteering and tourism activities (Scott 2021). In addition, some authors classify voluntourism as “altruistic travel” (Kumar 2020), but this is in direct contradiction to the previously presented division between volunteering and voluntourism, where only pure volunteering is seen as altruistic.

There is the parallel use of the terms voluntourism and volunteer tourism. Here again there is no resolution about the use of the terms globally. Some authors expressively mention that these are synonyms (Kumar 2020). Others speak of voluntourism as a form of volunteer tourism but do not bring any specific evidence of the existence of two separate phenomena (British Council 2016). In this case Finnish language does not make any difference linguistically. Since the aim of our research is not augmenting this distinction, we use both terms as synonyms.

Wearing (2001) provides an explanation for why this form of tourism is so little known. According to him, volunteer tourism has generally suffered from the fact that it is not separated from other forms of tourism or volunteering, but belongs to, i.e., alternative tourism, international volunteering and social work.

Voluntourism is not a new concept. Volunteering while travelling has been globally practiced over time. (Tourism Research and Marketing 2008.) Scholars use various perspectives to evaluate the motives of voluntourists (e.g., Callanan & Thomas 2005; Benson & Seibert 2009; Holopainen 2015; Yeung 2004). Tourists who choose to travel for volunteering have both selfish and unselfish motives (Raymond 2007; Pekurinen 2014). The experiences, attributes, and benefits as well as motivation of the volunteering tourists are broadly researched. The motivation can be split to push and pull factors (Benson & Seibert, 2009), that demonstrate the main motives in five categories: experiencing new or different, meet local people, learn about cultures, live in abroad and broaden one's mind. The latter one refers to self-awareness approach which is also presented in the previous studies (see e.g., Coghlan & Weller 2018; Han, Lee & Hyun 2020). Voluntourism as community-based tourism is referring to a desire for experiencing authenticity (Brown 2005; Kontogeorgopoulos 2016), which is typically present in the studying. Also, the live-like-a-local trend is an attempt to experience authenticity and get closer to the everyday life of locals (Pitkänen 2020; Koutonen 2018). Journal articles refer to lots of field work from development countries but Wearing, Young and Everingham (2017) identified that voluntourism has distanced itself from development aid on the path towards intercultural mutuality and de commodification.

1.2 Voluntourism and sustainability

Voluntourism is considered a form of sustainable tourism because it offers a deeper understanding of the nature, history, and local community of a destination than traditional sightseeing tours (Holopainen 2015; Konu et al. 2017; Kangas & Heinonen 2011). In the best case, by volunteering the tourists can minimize or prevent the negative effects of their trip, for example by rehabilitating nature sites or by animal protection (Kangas & Heinonen 2011). From climate change point of view, voluntourism to faraway destinations and short stay experiences cannot be considered low-carbon volunteering tourism (El Geneidy & Baumeister 2019), and then is not the most sustainable voluntourism.

If the volunteering project is genuinely community-based, voluntourism can promote community-based tourism by nurturing local culture, supporting local services, and reducing poverty (Spenceley & Meyer 2012; McGhee 2014; Waller 2018). However, there are many warning examples globally that voluntourism can be harmful and exploitative (Konu et al. 2017; Waller 2018), mainly when it concentrates on the commercial instead of local benefit (Guttentag 2009; Wilkinson, McCool, & Bois 2014). McGhee (2014) suggests more research to be done on how social media impact on such a type of tourism. Sometimes volunteer work is organized as a mere attraction for tourists, not derived from the genuine need of the destination or the locals. The most notorious example worldwide is of orphanages where children are not orphans (Gharib 2021; Pitkänen 2020). Activities are not sustainable either when the operating environment of the destination has not been considered. Sometimes volunteering takes the jobs away from the locals (British Council 2016). The critical perspective is brought when the residents desire is not considered (Lee 2020).

The pandemic had a strong impact on tourism and forced a reassessment of the sector's structures. Like all crises, it brought not only negative effects but also opportunities to develop tourism, e.g., in a more sustainable direction (Vărzaru 2021). For some, it is even a "once in a lifetime opportunity" for tourism industry to change (Muller 2020) by turning its lessons into strategies and concrete actions to bring about organizational change and build a more sustainable business (Vărzaru 2021). Resilience could mean diversifying both target groups and forms of tourism. During the pandemic lockdowns, the focus turned to domestic tourists and short-distance tourism, but in the long run, international tourism is still a viable goal (i.e., Council of Central Finland, n.d.). International volunteering is recognized as one alternative type of tourism, and this concerns especially the interrelation with the host and volunteer. Pompurová, Marčeková, Šebová, Sokolová & Žofaj (2018) found out that engagement of voluntourists could be more effective in the events in Slovakia in which the half of the event organizers utilized this type of tourism.

Even earlier, solutions were sought in tourism for negative phenomena, such as overtourism, littering, reducing biodiversity, trampling on local culture, etc. (Goodwin 2014). The importance of niche tourism is increasing as a contrary of mass tourism (Callanan & Thomas 2005). Domestic market has its potential, but the motives for

participation in domestic voluntourism activities are volunteer-specific, while in international voluntourism tourist-specific motives prevail. (Pompurova et al. 2020.)

Modern humanists as an emerging tourist segment seeking to influence the problems of mass tourism through their own behavior and by demanding sustainability (Visit Finland 2014). They care about the future of the world and society, appreciate genuine encounters, and want to learn something new during their journey (Rannisto 2012). Modern humanists are a key target group for Finnish tourism (Visit Finland 2014). They are associated with another yet closely related to voluntourism travel trend – transformational travel, where the traveler aims at learning and developing as a person during the journey and at gaining new perspectives (Rupp 2020; Pitkänen 2020; Mueller & Scheffer & Closs 2020). McIntosh and Zahra (2007) found out that the traditional cultural tourism product was not experienced as transformative as volunteer activity strictly participating in Maori community. In addition, regenerative tourism is connected to these phenomena. While transformational travel builds the traveler, the regenerative tourism aims at influencing the destination. It is an upcoming travel trend that seeks an answer to the question: What do we want to leave behind and what do we want to take forward? (Ateljevic 2020). Coghlan and Gooch (2011) applied transformative learning theory into existing voluntourism literature, and they created 10 steps model on how to ensure such an experience in volunteering tourism projects. They stated that especially the voluntourism products should be improved by adding more sustainability in the outcome, such as reintegrating this type of tourism into society.

2. Research methods

This research investigates the potential for voluntourism in the province of Central Finland. It is an early stage of the development of coordinated voluntourism in the region, by which we aim at evaluating its current stage with its opportunities and threats. We have conducted three studies. We first investigated existing non-scientific data such as online reviews, blogs and media articles and video presentations, as well as more systematic sources such as bachelor's and master's theses. They describe the existing voluntourism activity in Central Finland and nationally, and also the global services available in Finland. This data presents the standpoints of hosts, intermediary organizations, as well as the experiences of voluntourists. Secondly, we conducted an online questionnaire which targeted municipality actors, such as mayors, business representatives, as well as regional developers and Leader local action groups, rural entrepreneurs, farm owners, village associations and other parties of interest in Central Finland. The questionnaire contained separate sets of questions for developers and for associations and enterprises, who actually host voluntourism activity. The questionnaire was sent by email to all 22 municipalities of Central Finland, to the four Leader action groups in the region, as well as to associations and companies of convenience. The recipients were asked to spread it further as the snowball sample. Thirdly, we interviewed key actors about their current activity and interest in voluntourism in order to discover examples of existing uncoordinated voluntourism activity in the region. Altogether 22 theme interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, due to covid-19 restrictions. Most of the interviewees represent farms and rural enterprises of Central Finland, village, youth, and culture associations. However, some were also representing Finnish institutions and national or regional associations supporting volunteerism, tourist operators and destination management organizations.

3. Findings

The findings of the research describe the identification of voluntourism phenomenon in Finland, the existing concepts, and operational models nationally, as well as the actors and activities related to Central Finland.

3.1 Identifying voluntourism in Finland

Already as a start, we discovered that voluntourism is a multi-dimensional and complicated term, which is almost completely unknown in Central Finland. Although its investigation was not an aim of our online questionnaire, these conclusions became its mere outcome. The potential respondents, even those who organize voluntourism activity, did not identify with the term already stated in the title of the questionnaire – and consequently decided not to answer or further spread it.

Simultaneously, we were conducting interviews with actors of rural Central Finland, such as farm owners, tourism entrepreneurs, business developers, village association representatives – partially the same ones targeted by the questionnaire, so we were able to gather the missing information. Some actors reported carrying out tourism activities, others volunteer activities, but not any combination of both.

Even when the term is familiar, it involves plenty of prejudice, image factors, conditions of financing, and legal clauses. Voluntourism exists both nationally and in Central Finland, but it is not socially agreed that this activity is specifically called so. There are a variety of terms used instead: long-term volunteering, international volunteering, cultural exchange, volunteer camps, regenerative tourism, adventure holidays, woofing, twaming, etc.

One reason for avoiding the term voluntourism is that it is globally perceived negatively because of ethical issues (Wendelius 2019; Häkkinen 2019). However, this does not explain the problem when it comes to Finland, where there is a functioning legislation and a healthy, active society (Konu et al. 2017).

Another reason for the avoidance may be that hosting and intermediary organizations tend to differentiate by naming similar activity differently. For example, Maailmanvaihto, representing ICYE in Finland, talks about international volunteering (Takalo 2021) and KVT, the national representative of Service Civil International, about long-term volunteering (Viitaniemi 2021). These terms emphasize the longevity of activity, and, in comparison, tourism is seen as short-term. According to these organizations, tourism could, at best, be an added value or complement to a visit, and they do not recognize the touristic motives behind the mobility of volunteers. Regarding duration, tourism is considered as a visit lasting from one night (Theobald 1998) to a year (Statistics Finland n.d.). The duration of volunteer trips usually varies from a couple of weeks (WWOOF n.d. a) to a year (Takalo 2021; Viitaniemi 2021). Due to the overlap duration cannot be a diversifying factor. There are also organizations like WWOOF and TWAM that use their own brand as a verb, unwilling to define precisely what is at the core of their activity (WWOOF n.d. b; Travel with a mission 2018).

Some parties emphasize the activities taking place during the visit or its added value instead. According to Workaway (Workaway n.d.), Purola Farm and Cafe Meijerinliiteri, voluntourism is primarily a cultural exchange. According to KVT (Viitaniemi 2021) and Äijälän talo, volunteer camps are carried out. When a part of a commercial tourism product, the word “volunteering” is avoided, and the concept of regenerative tourism is preferred. Commercialism may rule out altruism, but not the potential benefits for society. However, tour operators do not take the risk of confusing potential customers by offering them a volunteering holiday with a price tag.

Sometimes the use of the term can be an actual prerequisite of the activity. The Ministry of Justice no longer uses the term “volunteer work” because work involves certain legislation and obligations. Instead, the terms “volunteerism” and “volunteer activity” are preferred. Tourism is not an activity to get funded by the EU Solidarity Corps, thus this international mobility is seen as volunteer activity and active citizenship for young people (Kivimäki & Lehto 2021).

Parks & Wildlife Finland organizes shepherd's weeks. It is a concept, by which the state-owned enterprise maintains nature sites under its governance by letting livestock graze the land and tourists spend a week at a time as shepherds. The organization, however, does not want to get involved in the tourist business, so shepherds only pay for their accommodation and shepherd's weeks are described as a “holiday with woolly scent” (Hakkarainen 2021). In its guidelines WWOOF emphasizes that the primary reason for volunteers to travel is vacation because the organization is not an employment agency, and in this way wwoofers are able to cross borders on a tourist visa without further explanation (WWOOF Independents n.d. b).

We also revealed that the parties coordinating volunteering in Finland, such as the Citizen Forum, the Ministry of Justice and NGO Support in Central Finland, had not encountered the term voluntourism before, but after getting acquainted with it, consider it a form of volunteering, which is a significant step towards promoting voluntourism. Voluntourism is better known in the tourism industry in Finland, which does not fear using the term. So far, no significant investment has been made to its development, but voluntourism is mentioned as an alternative and responsible tourism trend (Business Finland n.d.; Konu & Tyrväinen & Tuulentie 2017).

3.2 Voluntourism concepts from Finland applicable in Central Finland

The voluntourism is as fragmented nationally, as it is in Central Finland, thus it has been difficult to discover the good practices scattered across Finland.

A very strong example of a successful voluntourism concept, that was initially developed in Koli National Park and later spread nation-wide, are the shepherd's weeks organized by Parks & Wildlife Finland. In 2021 there was a total of 15 destinations and almost 15 000 applications of people, wishing to try the voluntary shepherding for a week. The target customers are domestic voluntourists, which has worked particularly well during the pandemic. The concept incorporates several beneficiary groups, which justifies activity's public benefit. It is not only the organization hosting the voluntourists who benefits from the visit, but also local farmers, the nature site, as well as the visiting volunteers (figure 1). Another reason for this concept to be successful is the clear division of touristic and voluntary elements: the voluntourist pays only for the accommodation, the price of which does not differ from the regular price of the facility at other times (Hakkarainen 2021). Added value, however, comes from the shepherd's activity, and some customers admit, they wouldn't visit the same place or pay the price if it was not for the shepherding. Parks & Wildlife Finland's concept has been so attractive, that it has spread out to privately-owned farms. Also, the variety of animals has increased – cow camps in Karelia, various sheep farms offering shepherd's holidays, including one in Central Finland, and husky farm activities in Eastern Finland. Sheep-related activities are reaching such a supply density that in near future the demand may not be enough to cover it. The activities, involving other animals hold more potential, because the supply is still very scarce. In Central Finland there are a lot of horse farms, which could benefit from volunteer-based animal care. Many of them are too small and not eligible for holiday replacement service, which in Finland gives the farmers the opportunity to spend some days off intensive farming, thus voluntourists could offer a much-needed help. Shepherding in Finland is nowadays so popular, that the concept is applied even to plants, e.g., "shepherding of herbs".

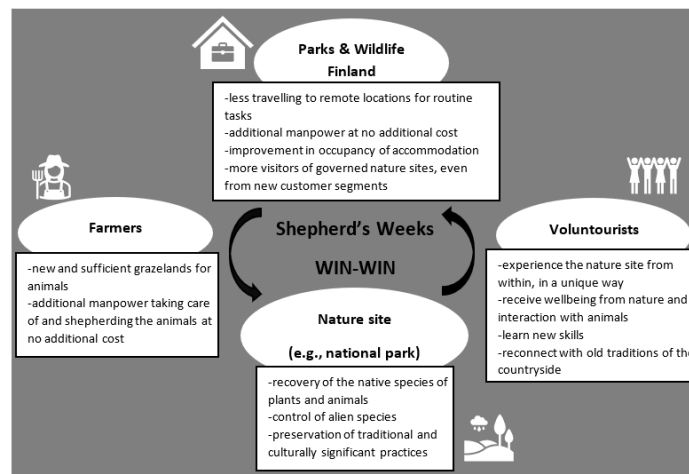


Figure 1: The beneficiary groups and benefits of shepherd's week concept

There are no other distinct concepts in Finland to take example from regarding voluntourism. In fact, even tourist agencies, specializing in voluntourism and regenerative tourism, have difficulties tracking down and establishing relationships with actors, who could provide such tourism activity. The non-profit international intermediary organizations represented in Finland, have small-scale domestic activity, mainly based on reciprocity of the general action. They usually count on Finnish tourism pull factors to attract the volunteers from abroad, but rarely intentionally include touristic elements into their programs or require such from the hosts (Takalo 2021; Viitaniemi 2021). The non-profit volunteer mobility, whether it is called voluntourism or not, is not well represented in Central Finland, and the intermediary organizations have a hard time naming any host partners from the region (Takalo 2021; Viitaniemi 2021), but Central Finnish parties could benchmark activities from other regions. Some online platforms, mainly the ones focusing on agriculture, have a few destinations from Central Finland (WWOOF Independents n.d. a), but others, e.g., the ones invested in social volunteering, don't have any Finnish entry, nor they perceive Finland as a potential destination. Finland does not need social volunteer work as an aid, in the same meaning as countries of the Global South, but socio-culturally oriented voluntourism could bring practical benefits such as event organizing and language teaching help, companionships for elderly people, as well as affect bigger processes, such as the reform of life in Finnish countryside.

3.3 Active and potential destinations of voluntourism in Central Finland

The study discovered altogether 12 actors, hosting voluntourism in Central Finland, yet it is possible that there are more. The activities organized in these active destinations focus on green care, gardening, animal care, youth work, work for the disabled, and less often also on culture, and are produced in co-operation with EU Solidarity Corps, international non-profit intermediary organizations, and online platforms. In addition, we interviewed about 10 potential actors. We sought geographical clusters of activity types but did not find any (figure 2). The voluntourism hosts have much in common, but do not know about each other's activity. The disadvantage of the voluntourism field in Central Finland is not the lack of activity, but its fragmentation and the miscommunication between actors, and geographical clustering might be beneficial at least in terms of co-operation.

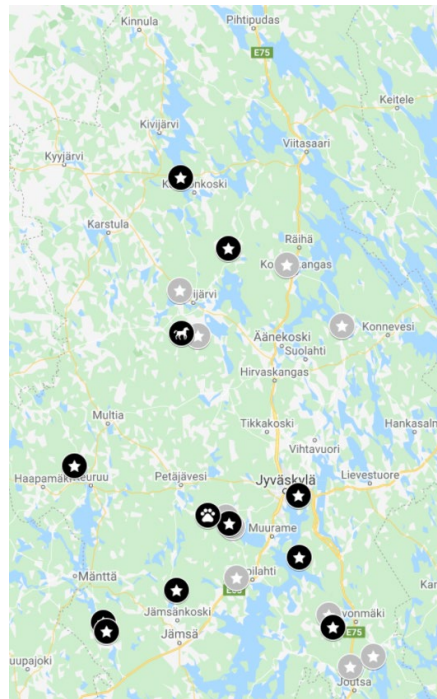


Figure 2: A map of the active (in black) and potential voluntourism hosts (in gray) in Central Finland

About 90% of the associations in Central Finland base their activity on volunteerism, however, they mostly rely on local resources. For example, the associations of national park friends regularly involve in prevention of alien species, as well as guiding or reconstruction work, but only recruit locals because of the lack of own accommodation capacity. Voluntourism could be the future for such associations since they already have the know-how of coordinating volunteers. However, in building volunteer products they need partners, which could also come from the travel industry, that is from the private sector.

It was first during the covid-19 pandemic that commercial incoming voluntourism activities were developed in Finland. Currently, there are only two tour operators that implement such trips. They work in co-operation and are actively seeking host partners, which is an opportunity for Central Finland.

3.4 Themes to incorporate in the voluntourism in Central Finland

As voluntourism has two cores, we describe the potential themes from two standpoints:

- the touristic factors - in terms of attractiveness of the region,
- the benefit of volunteerism for the region - in terms of help which local actors need.

Finland's pull factors are nature and cleanliness, safety, the education system, happiness, and the welfare state. Central Finland could also attract by lake landscapes, Alvar Aalto sites and the abundance of national parks.

The interviews revealed that volunteering is often associated with hiking, biking, snowshoeing, skiing, berry and mushroom picking, concerts and events, sauna, swimming, boating, and kayaking. The area, attractions, local recipes, and village togetherness are also of interest.

The countryside of Central Finland needs both visitors and helping hands to stay lively. There is a lot of work on farms that is not completed because the farmer does not have time and the nature of the work does not allow hiring anyone. There are large empty farms in the countryside that could potentially provide both accommodation and volunteer activities. Villages do not have the means to renovate or maintain buildings, trails, or summer theaters. For rural tourism companies, volunteering can mean extending the short active season. In addition, volunteers bring new ideas, practices, and know-how to serve locals.

4. Discussion and recommendations

In terms of identification of and with the term of voluntourism, our research discovered substantial problems both in the international term and its Finnish equivalent. Although the global knowledge about voluntourism is yet to be applied to Finland, the notorious examples of abusive practices are well-known even in Central Finland and decrease its potential due to prejudice. The rural actors of the region have versatile activity, sometimes combining farming, tourism, and volunteerism, but rarely put a name to each one. The lack of resolution on the term makes it extremely difficult to exchange knowledge, benchmark concepts and good practices. This can be overcome by communication or replacing the term. It is also important not to label the tourism-emphasizing activity as less worthy than pure volunteerism due to lower altruism level. After all, voluntourism is a combination of two sets of values – tourism and volunteerism in coexistence (see also McIntosh & Zahra 2007).

In terms of applicable concepts, we identified a strong one, the shepherd's weeks. Also, animal care is a suitable activity for voluntourism in Central Finland because of the province's large number of small-size farms. It should be considered, however, that it is almost impossible for a single farm, firm, or association to deliver as versatile benefits to as wide range of beneficiary groups as Parks & Wildlife Finland has. The chain of services of voluntourism in Central Finland is yet to be built and the only way is through co-operation. In the post-covid era, innovative concepts, especially involving domestic travelers and sustainability, are much needed. In fact, although our primary reason to research the possibilities of voluntourism was sustainability, and even though the region is certified by the Sustainable Travel Finland programme, none of the respondents identified this as a potential factor for their voluntourism activity. Volunteering and tourism must meet within the voluntourism concept, to accept and adopt each other's features. However, this study provide a limited and subjective perspective on the topic since the he informants are met based on project researchers' networks and snow ball sampling. In terms of actors and activities, our research found a vast potential in Central Finland. Finland and its central region may not be attractive to voluntourists in the same manner as developing countries, but cultural exchange, learning, self-development, and wellbeing, as in transformational tourism, are factors that could attract tourists to volunteering tasks as well. Central Finland can offer versatile nature and cultural experiences and needs the help of volunteers to stay lively and reform itself. There are many potential host organizations which wait an opportunity to connect to intermediaries and get their first, path-defining experiences with voluntourists. This cannot happen, however, without communication and coordination within a network. Reflecting the credibility of this study, it notable that the previous empirical knowledge is in major based on less developed countries in which is the originality of volunteering work. Similar stereotype might be a case in Finnish mind-set, and commercializing potential requires a local in-land role model action.

Our research is only a small step towards voluntourism in Central Finland. In fact, we discovered a nation-wide need for development of this tourism type. First, the spectrum of volunteer tourism forms should be conceptualized in Finnish context. Necessary next steps are the examination of relevant legislation and practical matters to answer the concerns of actors, building of customer profiles and defining reasonable pricing. Later, the conceptual work should be piloted as well.

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