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## **The Pause That Refreshes**

### **Vacation time is volunteer time for more and more Americans**

By MEG SOMMERFELD

The homes her team built were simple ones -- 400-square-foot structures with concrete or tile floors -- but for the new homeowners, that was still a major improvement over their old shacks of cardboard or sticks.

For Ms. Van Gorp, who is a manager of volunteers at Habitat's Charlotte affiliate, it was also a chance to participate directly in the work of her charity.

"When you work in an office for any non-profit, you are often the troubleshooter, dealing with a crisis or just planning for the future," says Ms. Van Gorp. "But when you go out on one of these builds, you really get to know the family and the volunteers. That helps you when you are sitting in that meeting and trying to decide whatever the pressing issue is, to remember that you are doing this for these families."

Ms. Van Gorp is just one of thousands of Americans who spend their vacation time volunteering for non-profit organizations around the globe. Today hundreds of non-profit groups offer short-term volunteer opportunities. Vacationers can maintain national park trails in Hawaii, help run medical clinics in Mexico, dig for dinosaur bones in Wyoming, or assist scientists observing marine life in the Caribbean. While some people, like Ms. Van Gorp, volunteer in a field or for a charity with which they are already familiar, others work on projects unrelated to their regular jobs, and for charities they may never have heard of before.

Such trips are so popular that a guidebook called *Volunteer Vacations*, by Bill McMillon, has sold 50,000 copies since it was first published in 1985 and is now in its seventh edition.

Overseas volunteer programs, in particular, have been growing explosively, prompting the creation two years ago of the International Volunteer Programs Association. It now represents 50 member organizations that send about 15,000 volunteers to other nations each year; it estimates that an additional 250 groups are operating such programs.

Christine Victorino, the association's director, says that while Americans are traveling more than ever, they hunger for deeper connections to other people and cultures that they often can't make through standard tourist options.

Also behind the surge of interest in volunteering vacations: demographics. With single adults and retired people growing in number, demand for opportunities to meet new people and learn new skills is on the rise. And busy young and middle-aged professionals are often looking for short-term options that combine service with adventure.

"People don't mind working hard," says Susan Ellis, president of Energize, a Philadelphia consulting company that specializes in volunteer issues. "A vacation doesn't have to mean a rest, but it needs to be a

change."

### **Value for Corporations**

Companies are also beginning to show interest in sponsoring volunteer vacations for their employees, partly because they help build new skills such as working in teams. Break Away, which runs volunteer programs for college students who are on spring break or other vacations, says it has received so many inquiries from companies that it is now developing a corporate version of its program.

Non-profit leaders admit that it's not always easy to manage short-term volunteers, and that constantly training new sets of novice volunteers can be time-consuming.

Nevertheless, many charity officials say the effort is worthwhile because volunteer programs increase public awareness of their organizations and of the value of community service. Some have found success turning first-time volunteers into repeat volunteers or even donors.

While for the most part vacation programs aren't big revenue generators, they often cover all or most of their costs. In many cases, charities have controlled costs by passing them on to participants. So while many programs cost the volunteer little or nothing beyond travel to the site, others charge substantial sums -- \$3,000 or more in some cases -- for the privilege of participating.

### **An Explosion of Interest**

Like many charities, Habitat for Humanity International did not initially anticipate the explosive growth of interest in short-term "vacation volunteering."

In 1989, it created its Global Village vacation-volunteer program as a way to respond to requests it periodically received from people who wanted to help Habitat's overseas affiliates.

That first year it sent 450 volunteers; it now sends 4,500 a year to sites around the United States, Canada, Africa, Asia, Central America, and Europe.

The organization is now making a deliberate effort to use the Global Village program to attract new volunteers, raise money, and assist staff members.

"Someone might go on an international trip with Habitat, and it is the first thing they have ever done before" with the charity, observes David Minich, director of the Global Village program. "Then they have such a great experience, they go home to Los Angeles or Portland and get involved with their hometown affiliate."

Habitat has also found that the program not only pays for itself, it generates additional revenue. The Global Village program, with a staff of 15 people, costs \$350,000 a year to operate, but raises an additional \$700,000 from volunteers, who often make contributions in addition to covering their own expenses.

Participating in one of the 10- to 20-day Global Village programs can cost \$1,500 to \$4,000, including airfare. Typically volunteers book their own flights and pay their local Habitat affiliate for their accommodations, meals, and other expenses.

The Habitat affiliate in Charlotte, where Ms. Van Gorp works, gives staff members a week's paid

vacation each year so they can volunteer at another one of the charity's affiliates. In addition to her three trips to El Salvador, Ms. Van Gorp has used this benefit to participate in "builds" in Canada, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Besides giving office staff members a chance to get involved in providing direct services, Ms. Van Gorp says, the program builds relationships between Habitat affiliates, including designated "partner" affiliates in developed and developing countries. Board members are also encouraged to participate, as are Habitat homeowners themselves. The Charlotte affiliate has solicited donations to pay for the expenses of the homeowners, who are typically low-income families.

"It made them feel really wonderful that they were in a position to help another family," says Ms. Van Gorp.

### **Appeal for Old and Young**

Many other groups have seen interest in "vacation volunteering" skyrocket.

When the Student Conservation Association, in Charlestown, N.H., was founded in 1957, just 52 young people participated in its environmental conservation programs that summer. This year 2,200 students are volunteering in the 50 states, and a total of 35,000 have participated during its four decades of existence.

While programs offered by groups like the Student Conservation Association appeal to younger generations, other non-profit groups are finding that their programs are popular with older vacationers, especially retired people.

CEDAM (Conservation, Education, Diving, Awareness, Marine Research) International, in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., says the average age of its volunteers is 50 to 55, which may be partly because older people are better able to afford its programs.

Volunteers pay from \$1,000 to \$3,000 to travel on one of CEDAM International's one- to two-week marine-research expeditions to the Caribbean, the South Pacific, the African coast, and Asia. Besides covering the participants' own costs, the fees also cover the expenses of the one or two scientists who accompany each group of about 16 volunteers.

On a typical program, volunteers scuba dive near environmentally endangered areas, using photography and video to document the condition of the coral reefs and marine life they encounter. When not underwater, they write up their observations, conduct research, and attend lectures presented by the scientists.

While attendance at every session isn't mandatory, a roll call is taken. Participants are encouraged to log how they spent their hours -- especially if they plan to claim a tax deduction for expenses incurred doing legitimate volunteer work. And just like on the television show *Survivor*, says Rick Sammon, the group's president, "the people who don't do work are not the most popular people."

### **Controlling Costs**

Charities that offer volunteer vacations expect to see continued growth, but observers believe that the vacations will never meet their full potential until non-profit groups can find ways to reduce the costs to the participants.

Already, some charities feel under pressure to make sure volunteers understand the expenses involved in operating a well-run project.

The Global Service Corps, in San Francisco, charges \$1,700 to \$2,820 for its programs, which this year are sending 125 volunteers to Costa Rica, Kenya, and Thailand to teach people about AIDS, help farmers become more efficient, and work on other projects aimed at improving living conditions. The organization gives each volunteer a document that spells out exactly where his or her money goes. "We let these people who are volunteering know that it takes a lot of time, resources, and money to prepare their project for them," explains Rick Lathrop, the charity's executive director.

Mr. Lathrop says that he would like to find ways to reduce the costs for volunteers -- and therefore increase the diversity of people who can afford to join the trips -- but that he has not found much encouragement from foundations and other donors he has asked for support. Part of the problem, he fears, is that because programs like his are described as "volunteer vacations," they don't sound as if they accomplish much.

"'Volunteer vacations' is catchy and perhaps it describes the trip for some of these people," Mr. Lathrop says. "But it doesn't do our program justice."

### **Promoting Diversity**

Some organizations have been taking steps to ensure that volunteer trips are an option for low- and middle-income people. Three years ago, the LaFetra Operating Foundation, in San Francisco, started the BRIDGES program (for Building Responsible International Dialogue Through Grassroots Exchange), which each year awards 7 to 10 fellowships to people who could not otherwise afford to participate in overseas volunteer programs.

Viviana Rennella, director of BRIDGES, says most people who take volunteer vacations "tend to be young white women from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds."

Ms. Rennella and others say that diversifying the types of volunteers will have many benefits. She says it's important to ensure that a wide array of Americans can volunteer. What's more, many of the fellows are community activists and grassroots organizers who have experience and skills that can help people overseas, but who often can't afford the cost of a volunteer vacation.

Meanwhile, groups like Mobility International focus attention on how to improve access for disabled people. In addition to leading its own volunteer and exchange programs, the organization advises other non-profit groups on how to improve access for people with disabilities, and operates an information and referral service.

While numerous "volunteer vacation" programs focus on either the outdoors -- environmental conservation or archaeology, for example -- or economic development, another area with many volunteer opportunities is the medical field.

One group, Health Volunteers Overseas, in Washington, initially focused only on orthopedics, but expanded its programs in 1986 after medical professionals in other fields expressed interest in volunteering. Today it sends more than 300 health-care professionals to 22 countries each year.

"This gives them a shot in the arm as to why they got into medicine, especially in this era of managed care," says Kate Fincham, director of program support. "They are spending more time with the patient,

they are sharing skills."

One challenge the group sometimes faces is how to best prepare medical professionals used to working in top-notch facilities.

"It's one thing to be very altruistic and want to do this," she notes. "It's another to go to a place and think you are going to operate a training method and you may not have any water or power."

In spite of such challenges, experts say most volunteers find the vacations rewarding. One reason may be that most of the vacations focus on completing a specific project. That allows almost everyone to gain a sense of accomplishment, whether they built a house or helped run a camp for children with cancer. And the one thing all volunteers want, says Nan Hawthorne, who runs an online discussion group for managers of volunteers, "is to be effective and succeed at what they are doing."

*Domenica Marchetti contributed to this article.*

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