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## PRESS RELEASE – 9 May 2010

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### ***Voluntourism – the high road or the low road?***

***There has been a lot of talk about “responsible” tourism and volunteering in the press. But what does it all mean and how does it impact me? Read a previous blog post made by our multiple award-winning volunteer placement partner VOLUNTOURS:***

### **Voluntourism – the high road or the low road?**

Although it is ultimately the volunteer who decides with which organisation they want to volunteer with and who will receive their hard earned money, it is vital that organisations provide responsible and ethical programmes. It is disturbing to see more and more articles on-line in which volunteers are over-promised and under-delivered. Is it just a matter of time before South Africa features as one of these “irresponsible” volunteer destinations?

See articles on-line that show the irresponsible side of volunteering:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/6065538/The-pitfalls-of-gap-volunteering.html?state=target#postacomment&postingId=6068009>

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/news/article6788628.ece>

Admittedly there is a growing awareness from consumers that they should do their homework properly. But even then many websites look “responsible and ethical” - they use all the right terminology, are picked out by search engines looking for these key words or phrases. “Green washing” is difficult to see through and many website promote themselves as ethical and responsible volunteer / voluntour organisations.

Voluntourism in South Africa is booming! Every day we come across another operator starting up. Some plagerising material from our own website without even attempting to change the wording. On face-value these websites looks good and say all the right things. But look a bit deeper and the cracks start to emerge. Some of them are not registered companies, some do not list their company registration number, some operate without a physical address, some only have a mobile number to contact them on .... and the list goes on.

The global trend of large wholesale tour operators offering voluntourism products has come to South Africa. A potential shortcoming in a lot of voluntourism models is that they operate their programmes like a normal retail travel booking – your community placement or should I rather say “booking” is automatically guaranteed and your money is taken. Importantly **no screening** or **matching of skill** takes place. What this means in practice is that the receiving community – in some cases vulnerable communities, with little rights and influence, often with OVC (Orphans and/or Vulnerable Children) in their midst - has no say on **who** comes into their community or **what** they will be doing. This “push” approach to volunteering does not always take into account the needs of the community and brings its own set of risks. In a worse-case scenario these operators could be sending pedophiles to work with children.



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Voluntourism has many risks that communities themselves may not be aware of. Despite these risks, they often “buy-in” to voluntourism because of the promise of a monetary donation. One of the risks being that dependency is created and/or increased. And in some cases, the community often does not have the capacity to effectively utilize the large number of volunteers sent to them. If voluntourism is to make a sustainable contribution to communities then it is important that they do not replace local labour but work with local labour. Much of the “work” that volunteers are asked to do can and should be done by employing local labour. Should volunteer programmes be geared more at passing on higher-order skills than doing basic maintenance and repair work?

Volunteers should look beyond marketing-speak when selecting their volunteer organisation. Look at the way the organisation presents and markets itself, and what’s in it for the community. Some volunteer placement companies offer very short-term placements - this can range from a few half-days to a day or two where they are told they can make a difference. While others, offer a day or two in the community to “pass-on-skills” before driving their tour-bus onto the next waiting community. How best can the needs of the community be served? Are volunteers really able to pass on skills in a day or two? Should operators be educating their clients on the pitfalls of short-term volunteering or are they meeting a demand?

South Africa’s voluntourism market needs to look at the real issues before offering a community-based project. As a voluntourist destination South Africa should be providing an ethical product and not placing our communities at unnecessary risk. As an operator you need to ask yourself, have you thought through the implications and risks of offering a community based volunteer programme?

Should there be an independent body to “accredit” or certify responsible operators or programmes working with minors? Should we looking at best practice in the UK and the US where it is mandatory for anyone wanting to volunteer with children / minors to have a police clearance issued? Do you see the voluntourism industry regulating itself or will government step-in?

VOLUNTOURS published a *Code of Good Practice: Volunteering in South Africa* and we encourage other organisations to join us and adopt this Code thereby making South Africa more of a responsible volunteering destination.

Visit us at **stand number ICCA 002** and chat with us about responsible and ethical volunteering issue!



### **Imvelo Awards for Responsible Tourism**

2008 Winner - Chairman's Award  
2008 Finalist - Best Social Involvement Programme  
2007 Joint Winner – Chairman's Award  
2007 Highly Commended - Best Practice: Economic Impact  
2007 Finalist - Best Social Involvement Programme

**2008 TO DO! AWARDS Short-listed within top 8 !**



**Interviews and images available on request. Contact Marnie Heim-Stafford 082 441 2749**