

“Volunteering made me feel like part of something bigger.”: Service learning in international volunteer programs

Kym Treacy¹, Vailoa Milo-Harris²

1 AustraLearn, PO Box 65 CQU, Rockhampton, Qld, 4702. australia@australearn.org

2 AustraLearn, PO Box 65 CQU, Rockhampton, Qld, 4702. australia@australearn.org

According to the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (USA), service learning is "a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in ... service that ... meets the needs of a community". AustraLearn students from America and Canada, who come to Australia and/or New Zealand to study, are invited to participate in a volunteer conservation project, with the anticipated outcome that their participation will enhance their service learning experience in-country. Australearn students who studied between 2006 and 2008 were invited to respond to a survey on their volunteer experience whilst in country. Seventy-nine students, who had been volunteers on various projects, responded to the survey. This presentation examines some of their experiences. The majority of these projects were environmental recovery and/or monitoring activities. Students commented on both the interaction with the environment and interaction with other people as the two main positive experiences emerging from their participation. In particular, seeing a different environment, and mixing with people from other parts of the world (and even other parts of America), students were exposed to a “bigger picture” of their own world. As one student states: “Volunteering work made me feel like part of something bigger.” Many of the respondents (94%) already had volunteering experience prior to studying abroad. This prior experience of community engagement carried through with their Australian/New Zealand experience, such that it would appear many students would continue to engage in community service programs after completing their study abroad program. Of those students surveyed, who participated in a volunteer project through AustraLearn, 98.5% said they would recommend the volunteer opportunities to future students. The AustraLearn-facilitated volunteer programs not only provide support for needs of local communities, but also an environment of active participation that supports students’ development and learning, through a service-learning program.

Key Words

Service Learning, Volunteering, Study Abroad