



Guests on the Aegean: interactions between migrants and volunteers at Europe's Southern border

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Overview

This article, authored by Alexandra Knott, discusses the implications of volunteer tourism in refugee camps in the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios in the summer of 2016. The study takes place a year after the refugee crisis put dissuaded 'conventional' tourists from the popular holiday destinations, only to be replaced by volunteer tourists.

The study

Knott observed two NGOs (Lighthouse Relief in Lesbos and A Drop in the Ocean in Chios) who were involved in migrant camps to examine how volunteers interact with the asylum seekers arriving on the islands. The study is predominantly a discussion of observations made throughout her time volunteering for the NGOs accompanied with academic literature that support her findings. She also discusses her findings from interviews she conducted with 38 volunteers (the majority of whom were university students on their summer break, whilst others were graduates and some were professionals such as a lawyer and teachers) and 12 locals involved in the tourist industry.

Results

Knott suggests that the volunteer tourists are ineffective in helping both the situation in the camps and the situation of refugees at a wider scale. Not only is there a lack of training for volunteers, but their motivations are often misplaced. After conducting the interviews, Knott discovered that the feelings of guilt and 'having to do something' were common reasons for activity, combined with the idea that doing something is better than doing nothing. She shows that this is unfounded, and volunteer activity may be harming the situation. Furthermore, Knott criticises the asymmetric power relations in the 'host-guest' relationship innate in hospitality. This refers to the phenomenon in which the volunteers take on the role of 'host', despite the fact that neither group are locals, and the migrants are subjected to subordinate guest status and perpetually in debt to their 'gracious' hosts. Combined with a lack of volunteer awareness concerning their privileged position in the relationships, which, as she describes, can be unwittingly abused, Knott argues that tourist volunteers exacerbate the congested and bureaucratic asylum-seeking system rather than challenge it.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that the author does not consider the refugees themselves, nor the Greek locals, in her analysis. This excludes one of the most important voices from giving an input in a dialogue that is centred on them. However, she cites existing extensive research on this area, as well as a language and cultural barrier, as her justification for doing this. Furthermore, the paper focuses on her own observations and does not address in great detail her findings from the volunteers themselves.