

BLOG TEXT

“Panorama, contradictions and dilemmas of volunteer tourism in the Brazilian Amazon”

Researcher: Flávia Silveira Lenci and Dra. Andrea Rabinovici

My research proposal "Panorama, contradictions and dilemmas of volunteer tourism in the Brazilian Amazon" carried out in the Integrated Environmental Analysis Program of the Federal University of São Paulo, still in the data collection and literature review phase, is based on a personal initial experience that, when carrying out voluntary activities in the Brazilian Amazon, I was able to observe the weaknesses and strengths of this action when carried out together with the local communities. This experience enabled reflections and changes in personal paradigms that were motivating for questions that supported this research. There are several questions on screen: the transformative potential of the Amazon and traditional communities when visited in tourism projects, considering that visitors, immersed in realities increasingly distant from nature and human coexistence, reflect on their lives and can seek transform them, inspired by local communities and the ideas of socio-environmental sustainability.

And given the potential and the fact that tourism and volunteering activities already exist around the world, in Brazil the voluntourism activity, even though it is incipient, has been growing in the Brazilian Amazon.

In order for us to understand the context of the research, we first have to define what voluntourism is: according to Makanse and Almeida (2014) voluntourism aims to unite leisure travel with actions focused on social causes, a perspective of having a positive impact the place of the visit, a new type of experience.

However, as in any activity, there are many doubts and possible contradictions are still observed, such as: the dichotomy between what can be considered wealth and poverty, who is helping whom, who is benefiting or not (if there is clarity of benefit) , the extent to which the transformation of local communities is desirable, including the risk of losing their identities, values and wealth, becoming market segments and niches dependent on monetary income.

At the same time, as seen in authors on the subject, voluntourism is an alternative to income generation for Amazonian communities that, if well planned and studied, with the

participation of social actors in the communities in planning and actions, having a field with great potential to generate income and, even more, a greater appreciation of the region, ecosystem services and conservation of local biodiversity. This promotes more than responsible tourism, promotes a new way of acting and has a positive impact on the local community and visitors, and can extend the population in general.

For these reasons, and due to the fact that many companies and organizations in Brazil and abroad are working on different topics in the region, it is necessary to study, know, monitor and evaluate such activities, their nature, their potential, their dilemmas and conflicts, mainly due to the fact that today there are few publications and studies on the topic.

With the objective of creating a panorama of the practices of voluntourism, the study aims to know and map the practices, purposes and the agents that carry out the voluntourism in the Brazilian Amazon, verifying its potential, contradictions and challenges, as well as to verify if the social actors proposing the volunteer tourism actions and activities assess the impacts (cultural, social, economic and environmental) of their activities and how.

But not only that, the research aims to analyze the motivations and perceptions of volunteer tourists towards voluntourism and the understanding and assessment of the local population with the voluntourism activities carried out in the region. And for that, in this stage of the research it was necessary to make an on-site visit, accompanying a voluntary expedition in a community in the Brazilian Amazon, research stage that was supported by S3.

The choice of the company for the researcher's participation was based on a preliminary survey, choosing the one with the greatest impact on performance, in this case, the number of expeditions carried out and travelers.

The on-site visit started on February 22, 2020, towards the community of Lago do Acajatuba, located in Iranduba - AM, an expedition promoted by the voluntourism company Vivalá.

The voluntourism expedition promoted by the company lasted four days, divided into three days of leisure tourism, with handicraft workshops, visit to the flour house, sunrise view, tour to see the stars, among others, and a day for volunteers to conduct voluntary mentoring with local entrepreneurs, ultimately creating a business plan.

This region has received voluntourism activities promoted by Vivalá since 2017, with a focus on mentoring for local entrepreneurs. According to the company in charge, mentoring aims to empower entrepreneurs so that they can grow their businesses and strengthen the

region's income generation, while at the same time allowing volunteer tourists to get to know the reality of the Brazilian Amazon through voluntourism.

The on-site research trip is of relevant importance, as the methodology provides immersion and brings a perspective based on direct observation of a real context, and for my research it was essential to carry out the on-site visit, with the possibility of accompanying one voluntourism activity closely, observing and understanding, in practice, the company's voluntourism methodology, and mainly analyzing how it relates to the environment, tourists and especially the company's relationship with the local population. Such aspects are only possible to be measured by performing direct observation.

The research is ongoing, in the phase of collection and analysis of the collected data, to later relate to the studies already carried out on the subject, so that in the end it is possible to create a panorama of the practices in a descriptive way and to know and ponder about conflicts, contradictions and challenges of the activity. And more than that, after the conclusion, share the information and the results with the different social actors involved in voluntourism, so that it evolves in the discussion of the theme.