

## Original Paper

# The Tourist/Researcher Nexus: Investigating Social Justice Projects in Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos

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### Abstract

*Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos are destinations growing in popularity. All three countries are poor, with a context of recent or current conflict. Tourism is regarded as a potential saviour: a source of foreign money, whilst enhancing global awareness of each nation. Whilst tourism is largely government managed, diverse NGOs work to ameliorate conditions of the poor. There are also private social entrepreneurs running operations to upskill disadvantaged people. This paper explores a range of grassroots ventures. Tourists are the customers for most of these enterprises; so how does the academic researcher considering these spaces as case studies, differ from tourists?*

*Fieldwork took place on three visits, 2017-2019. Initiatives included artisan and craft projects, food producers, restaurants, and eco-tourism. For social entrepreneurs running these, their schema is responsible, grassroots development, to a social justice agenda. Many tourists consciously seek such sites. In this way, the touristic practice resembles the researcher praxis. This researcher, like any visitor, located such enterprises via websites, travel blogs, and in the field. Most functioned as charities or modest businesses. Ethically, and out of courtesy as well as desire, the researcher also purchased goods and services from each enterprise, exactly as tourists do.*

### Keywords

*Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, social justice, social entrepreneur, grassroots*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Grassroots Initiatives Aimed at Tourists

Home-grown grassroots pro-poor projects were investigated in this fieldwork. These are also referred to as social justice projects. This sector obtains slight—or no-practical intervention from government or from international aid organisations (Harrison & Schipani, 2017). Such small grassroots enterprises are

readily dismissed as an insignificant niche. Most function as charities or as very modest businesses. Certainly, the operators are powerless to address the larger structural or political issues of the nation. But each has created a slot where they can provide concrete assistance to local needy people. They generate experiences and skills that are truly life-changing for the participants. Local people who are significantly marginalised and disempowered through sex abuse, disability, HIV Aids, illiteracy and poverty, can develop skills for meaningful employment. Their new skills enable stronger participation in their communities, whilst as individuals they can enjoy the fulfilment of independence. These projects were the primary focus of this research.

The researcher, like any other tourist, sought such enterprises via websites and travel blogs, then visited them. The operators were identified and agreed to explain the processes and outcomes of their project. Tourists bring money; so does a researcher. Like any tourist, the researcher purchased goods and services at these enterprises. It was very clear that the proceeds made a tangible contribution. There was also a consciousness for the researcher/tourist that focusing on such enterprises enabled a welcome direct engagement with local people, for example with the makers of craft products, or with cycle tour guides. The initiatives relied on that satisfaction that tourists feel when they know their dollars are not being leaked to international companies but are going directly to those who have earned them. An exploration of that contrast and overlap of scholarly researcher/tourist is the other agenda of this paper.

## *1.2 The Case Studies*

### *(a) Cambodia: Siem Reap*

Siem Reap is the Cambodian town close to The Angkor Archaeological Park, the nation's top tourist attraction. Local authorities running the temple complex predict that the income could reach US\$117M by year end (2019), with about 2.6 million foreigners visiting.

Despite this income, poverty is readily apparent in the town of Siem Reap (local population about 100,000), and in the surrounding countryside. It is notable that within 10 kms of Angkor Wat people live without running water, electricity or education. The town also hosts migrants who have arrived because the popular tourism town might yield them an income: tuk tuk drivers, landmine survivors, ladyboys, street kids, prostitutes and beggars. It is these people who constitute the town's "street life" (Bell, 2017). To address local poverty, there are numerous social justice enterprises in the town, as well as training projects.

### *(b) Luang Prabang, Laos*

In 1995 Luang Prabang was awarded status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This invigorated tourism to this small town (local population about 58,000). The Laotian government strongly supports tourism, the nation's second highest income stream. In 2018 655,000 tourists visited Luang Prabang, a 205% increase since 2010.

Laos itself had almost 3,900,000 visitors in 2018, up from 2.5 million in 2010.

Luang Prabang was selected for this project (a) because of its popularity with tourists; and (b) because there are many social justice enterprises in and near the town.

*(c) Bagan and Yangon, Myanmar*

The other two case studies were Bagan and Yangon in Myanmar. are the other case studies. Since 2011 democratisation efforts in Myanmar have resulted in led a growing tourism industry. The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (MoHT) in the primary administrative organisation, plus the Myanmar Tourism Federation. There are various niche-specific agencies (Clifton, Hampton, & Jeycheya, 2018). Tourists can easily buy visas online. Internal airlines link the favoured destinations, and numerous websites promote accommodation and experiences. In 2010 there were 800,000 tourists to Myanmar, this number increasing to 3.44 million in 2017. The government's goal is 7.5 million arrivals by 2020, indicating optimism about continuing economic growth. Global news venues show political instability and the continuing Rohingya issue, plus the vested interests of the military. It may be that's some tourists boycott Myanmar for these reasons. But many tourists travel, apolitical, and happily oblivious of local conflict (Isaac, Cakmak, & Butler, 2019). This is the background against which this research took place.

*1.3 Theory: Social Good Pro-Poor Tourism*

From the late 1990s a pro-poor focus favoured tourism as a potential strategy to alleviate poverty. The pro-poor approach came about as a critique of structural reforms in developing nations: especially in "fragile and poorly governed states" (Bourguignon & Sundberg, 2007). The reforms were not annihilating poverty; in fact, in some places, poverty was increasing. But the global growth of tourism indicated that this could provide a solution. As many poor countries had exotic attractions and unique cultures that appealed to tourists, expanding this sector could be the route to the benefits of globalisation. Internationally, the positive fiscal benefits of tourism are measurable. For more than 50 of the globe's most disadvantaged countries, tourism had proven to be a key contributor to economic progress. But much profit goes to foreign companies, which dominate this sector in developing countries (Scheyvens, 2007). How could this be turned around, so that profits could be diverted to the poorest people? Tourism is in fact enlarging the gap between the poor and the affluent in the community (Zeng, 2018).

From the tourists' point of view, their choice to favour cheap destinations *depends* on the relative poverty of the host nations. Tourists select affordable destinations; local poverty ensures such affordability. Academic commentators have analysed the "post colonialist" mindset of tourists who empower themselves through such fiscal disadvantages in the host culture (Bell, 2017; Benson, 2014).

Pro poor tourism has been extensively debated (Harrison, 2008; Harrison & Schipani, 2008; Suntikui, Bauer, & Siong, 2009; Bakker & Messerli, 2017; Zeng, 2018). An over-riding critique is that it has been ineffectual at addressing structural change, re-allocation of wealth and resources, and for disregarding international and national power relations. Critics have argued that it accepts the status quo of existing fiscal regimes, and that its practitioners are commercially marginal (Truong, 2016). Further, it can be recast as colonialism disguised as altruism (Benson, 2014; Botterill, 2016). However, these incongruities do not inevitably "weaken the transformative potential of (social good) projects as a vehicle for economic equality and social justice" (Lyon, 2006).

The enterprises investigated for this paper are tiny businesses which may seem minor in a national

narrative of profitable tourism (Gujadhur & Rogers, 2008). At a national level, these projects are a very small component of the total tourist product. But an alternative interpretation was found at the local level (Lusby & Fow, 2014; Ashely, 2018; Chutia & Sarma, 2016). It was obvious to this researcher's first-hand experience that local individuals and families were benefiting significantly from the opportunities created by these initiatives. For the actual people involved, these initiatives provided a rare chance at self-empowerment. That such needs persist is indicative that extensive poverty persists.

## **2. Methodology: Qualitative Research**

This project is an example of primary research and was wholly qualitative. Locating enterprises that were specifically addressing local social problems and aimed at tourists as customers: this was the first task. The initiatives needed to be in reasonable geographical proximity for the researcher to visit during a limited six week fieldtrip. The researcher had had some contact with a few enterprises on prior visits to Cambodia and Myanmar. These were included, and occasionally provided information about further projects to visit.

The pre-visit research included trying to trace the operators of such organisations. This was attempted through websites advertising their projects; or through a search of web feature articles about these (often novel) ventures. This task was attempted for several months before departing for the fieldwork. It sometimes produced additional details about the projects. However, it was difficult to find reliable information about whom to contact.

The next approach was a search of tourists' blogs. There were many that placed an emphasis on social good/ethical travel/social justice agendas for travel projects. No new projects were located through this process; but it confirmed the suitability of those already noted.

The third strategy was to find participants once in the field. This proved to be fruitful: I visited well-promoted organisations, and invited advice about other projects to contact. These were the encounters of a mobile researcher (D'Andrea, 2006; Vannini, 2010); a practical and manageable strategy. At every site, even when I simply showed up (because efforts to contact via phone or email had failed), project operators or staff agreed to being interviewed. (In some instances the founding operator was either unavailable, or was no longer resident in the vicinity). Eventually, I managed to gather 30 in-depth qualitative interviews, one for each enterprise visited. Every interview took place on the site of the business /training operation. This meant I was able to benefit from first hand experience of the project. It also meant that I had the opportunity to actually see the project in action. This resulted in an assemblage of original primary data. Through actually being there, the operator's passion for their project was evident. The narratives about the establishment and progress of each enterprise was almost always thoughtful and inspiring.

The fourth part of the process was reflection on these activities. Retrospectively, I wanted to compare my own approach with the activities of tourists. How does a tourism researcher differ from a tourism consumer, when a lot of the time she is both? How can my work be justified, when much of my time as

a traveller is similar to that of any other tourist?

### *2.1 Research Limitations*

A familiar limitation when a foreign undertakes research in another culture, and does not speak or understand the local language, is that the opinions and views of the local people cannot be included. For this project, the lack of local language was a disadvantage. I could interview the entrepreneurs; but most of the workers did not speak English. The language gap, along with race difference, places the researcher as an outsider, a white female who does not live in the country where she is undertaking research.

Alongside this, her university funding provides a relatively luxurious physical space as she travels, a severe contrast to the conditions of many local people, who are living in poverty (Causey, 2003). This author, carrying out research, each day visiting poor people, then returning to her \$50 per night hotel, is well aware of the privileged nature of the researcher role. In this she is similar to other tourists. The key difference was the duration of each stay: up to two weeks in each place, whilst most tourists to the same locations stayed just a night or two.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 Types of Enterprise Found, Explicitly Aimed at Tourists*

- Weaving and sewing projects, using silk and cotton. Handmade artisan pieces were usually labelled with the name of the individual maker, often with a brief biography and photograph included.
- Some retail outlets had become “destination” shops, for example Pomelo and Hla-Day in Myanmar. Both shops display and sell quality of artisan goods. Stories and photographs of the individual makers adorn the walls. Items created exclusively for these outlets: handwoven baskets, local honey, coin jewellery, papier mache replicas of items in the National Museum; practical articles cleverly made from recycled bicycle tyres. These shops each have about 50 suppliers, many living in remote villages. Both of these large outlets businesses were located upstairs next door to favourite tourist restaurants.
- Eco tours, for example in Siem Reap to visit rural areas and villages; in Luang Prabang day tours to see elephants, or boat tours along the Mekong River to local pro-poor enterprises, including a pottery village.
- Various professional training restaurants, the trainees young people living in extreme poverty.
- Various enterprises invite visitors to converse with students, so they can practice English conversation.
- Practical workshops for tourists teach jewellery-making, pottery, textile dying, paper crafts.
- In Bagan: cycle tours to explore temples, or to visit the countryside.
- Near Luang Prabang a buffalo farm runs created pro-poor initiatives, in tandem with a health project promoting buffalo milk as a positive option for Laotians people.

### 3.2 Sustainability

Most tourists are not concerned about the sustainability of the enterprises they visit. I certainly did not hear—or overhear—this being discussed at any time. Yet this was a foremost consideration for the researcher. For the projects to function as positive interventions, it was essential that they are continuous and cost-effective. Initial evidence of sustainability was longevity: some had been operating for more than ten years. Most were started by a sole volunteer. This was usually thought being set up as an unofficial charity, for example, to encourage women artisans to create items for tourists to buy, to ensure them an income. For those running the longest, local staff were employed and paid. What started as modest little projects had moved to becoming businesses, many of them now well-recognised on tourist sites such as *Trip Advisor* and *Lonely Planet*. At the same time, they vigorously maintained their social goals of prioritising support to poor and needy local people.

Some of the enterprises had a further stream of cash and expertise by inviting international volunteers to assist in specialised areas. Volunteers would generally pay a fee to participate, perhaps US\$500, regardless of the duration of their stay. One example was volunteers designing garments to appeal to foreign tourists; the local women did the sewing. Others worked as tour guides to specialist attractions; as helpers in a range of roles in education enterprises; as hands-on advisors in organic or vegetarian/vegan restaurants; or as mentors for various types of farming. These volunteers are another category of traveller: like the researcher they are also tourists; and, also like the researcher, they have an additional agenda.

Every enterprise visited had evidence of sustainability. Most had been functioning for at least ten years. Their sustainability could be assessed in terms of

- 1) on-going commitment to Social Good ideology
- 2) commitment to assist and support disadvantaged people through social development
- 3) commitment to continuing and further cultivating training programmes
- 4) maintaining availability of resources, for instance for making textiles (cotton and silk weaving); paper making; restoring and upcycling damaged furniture; restaurant prerequisites.
- 5) All had strategies to maintain their business viability, e.g., rents for workshops and retail spaces, restaurant facilities.
- 6) Most continued to maintain and update websites to attract tourists.

### 3. Discussion

This discussion splits into two distinct sections. Discussion Part A is about the enterprises. Discussion Part B addresses the comparison between the researcher and the tourist.

#### *Part A:*

The discussion vis a vis the enterprises consists of three parts: social entrepreneurship; the role of these projects in addressing local needs; and the commercial manufacture of authenticity for tourist consumption.

### *3.1 Social Entrepreneurship*

All of the projects investigated depended on the commitment of social entrepreneurs. These facilitators-initiated projects as a practical response to local needs (Dejouny & Kim, 2011). Each of the case studies investigated had been set up by one or a few specific individuals. Some were foreigners, living in Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar. Most stated that they felt the advantage of their “outsider” status was that they had a good idea about what tourists would want. Many people had set up their project alone, others worked with a local partner.

The consistent agendas: low capital outlay, and of low environmental impact; the building positive relationships between hosts, workers and tourists; and vehement support for fair and equitable gains from tourism. The enterprises involved efforts to upskill, whilst protecting vulnerable people who have been bypassed in the labour market. Notably, many of the trainees in projects visited for this research had physical or mental disabilities. Others were survivors of enforced prostitution, violence, the AIDS epidemic, and other illnesses. Some of the trainees were former street kids, now rescued, housed and upskilled. Almost all had experienced the vulnerability that is intrinsic to extreme poverty.

All operators were hands-on. Each one talked about the necessity to remain independent of government or NGO affiliation. The goal was to bypass complexities of bureaucracies, and the potential for corruption. They were determined to maintain their personal control of projects, which they feared would be lost if they handed it over to any NGO. NGO’s were not perceived as necessarily reliable, trustworthy or effective. Nor did the entrepreneurs believe that making personal donations from afar was an option. Their replies to this proposition outlined details of why, for them, any other approach than directly hands-on carries moral and political concerns and risks. These operators commonly expressed criticism of the failures to deliver in the culture with which they are engaged. All were vigorously creating solutions where they could, at that grassroots level.

Empathy, compassion and moral obligation arising from pro-social values are the basis to engagement in social entrepreneurship (Borquist & de Bruin, 2019). A value-based and value-driven process, social entrepreneurship utilises addresses social problems that markets and governments consistently bypass (Saebi, Foss, & Linder, 2019). For these entrepreneurs, the goal is to achieve transformation through effective practical upskilling. While this, in this study, is taking place on a small scale, it is life changing for those directly enabled.

### *3.2 Addressing Needs, Now and Into the Future*

Concerted attempts to empower local people, especially women, their families and communities; and young people (street kids!), were abundantly apparent in this research. Encouragement to upskill as craft makers and in hospitality might indicate the reiteration of low skill, gendered jobs. This seems a very slow stepping stone to any more sophisticated job. But crafts can provide significant income for poor households (Ashely, 2018). Importantly, efforts by these entrepreneurs work towards an holistic generational solution: if adults can house and educate their children, then for the next generation the life chances are significantly greater. For the present employees/trainees/craft makers, their work can

provide long term association, for example making papier mache items for tourists and for interior designers (many hotels and restaurants display these colourful items). Practical skills acquired, such as using a sewing machine or hands-on restaurant skills, plus the discipline of everyday employment, might lead to stable positions outside the training organisation. Many project operators co-ordinated job placement, once their protégés were ready to move on.

All organisations visited provided either or both of the following:

- (a) stable jobs/training situations, often with meals, and occasionally with living accommodation. Some projects resulted in sufficient upskilling for individuals to participate in the mainstream labour market.
- (b) artisan skills which could be executed in the homes/communities of the craftspeople, plus a place to sell their goods.

*Manufacturing Authenticity: merchandise and experiences for tourists*

Tourists who visit and patronise social justice enterprises find a direct way to contribute to local people. They are conscious that their purchase will make a positive impact local people and/or environment' (www.backpackersandsunhats, 2018). Scholarly literature on such consumption sees it as motivated by the political choices and conscious reflexivity of Northern consumers. "This conscious social decision making is represented as a radical departure from previous consumption patterns... (this form of) consumption reflects the trends of globalization and individualization that prompt citizens to create new arenas for responsibility-taking while forging political and ethical identities" (Lyon, 2006). Even in a very small way, a tourist consumer can believe they are making a difference. There may be an element of assuagement of guilt at their own relative no-more-deserve wealth, relative to local people.

In each of these locations, large street markets attract tourists. Many of the items on sale are not handmade, or local, at all, but manufactured in factories or sweatshops in China. In Luang Prabang the huge night market has 400 stalls. More than half of these sell machine-made embroidery or woven silk and textiles, many of the sellers stocking the same items. 100% of the cotton and about 50% of the silk on sale is imported (Ashley, 2018). Ashley explains that if these items were produced within Laos, then profits from tourist textiles returning to local producers and suppliers would almost double.

Most tourists are aware that locally produced goods are sold in Fair Trade-style shops. Numerous websites advise about responsible travel and ethical shopping. There are local operators who guide tourists to artisan workshops in surrounding villages. This ensures that the tourist is buying unique items directly from the maker; plus meeting the maker as well, an enjoyable bonus for many travellers. Objects for sale, for example in a pottery village across the Mekong River from Luang Prabang, ensure income for that community. Visitors can watch as craftspeople make things, a guarantee of authenticity. Such processes are not included in the big night market.

In the same way, a bicycle tour hosted by a local person may even include a visit to his family's home. This is an inviting way to engage with a local person, and experience even a few hours of their everyday world.

And so the tourist researcher comes away laden with purchases, conscious of the need to not only



support these enterprises and the makers, but also to “pay” for the time kindly given by the staff.

### *3.3 Part B. Researchers and Tourists*

Most social researchers have the luxury of choosing their own topics, just as tourists select their own holiday destinations. For the researcher, the “appeal” derives from all previous research: the skills and experience that have led to this career stage. Inherent is the need for clarity about what, for their employing institution, constitutes an appropriate research topic. The requires suitable methodology.

In both cases, if the research arena/holiday site has strong appeal, then a successful undertaking is likely. The academic researcher working internationally will have reasons to select a site. In my own case, this was based on having undertaken previous projects in the South East Asian region. I knew where that the types of enterprises I wished to research could be found. I was aware of the current political environments in which poverty remained largely unresolved. For tourists, these may not be significant considerations. However they will have their own reasons, however explicit or vague, for being drawn to a particular destination.

It is the academic research process that separates the researcher from the tourist. Many tourists are sympathetic with pro-poor and social good projects and seek these when they travel. That also involves research, to assist in furthering their own ends. Some maintain travel blogs, where they write about enterprises they have visited. Those are aimed at a global audience. But it is hard to find any blogs that rigorously contextualise the reasons the enterprises exist, with detail of the struggles within the political economy of that nation. Nor have they had time to investigate the actual transformations brought about by the existence of the projects.

Tourists also tend to make briefer visits to places, and to individual enterprises. Their time constraints may mean a “cherry picking” of local attractions. Social justice enterprises may not be first on that list. If they are in the presence of a craft maker, and if their overall trip is for long period, they may not wish to accumulate purchases to carry with them. So the inevitable selfie becomes the souvenir. This has no fiscal value to the craftsperson.

The travel equation of time/cost means they take a look, then quickly move on. In the destinations noted in this article, most tourists stayed just one, two or three nights. Hoteliers were puzzled that my bookings were for a fortnight. Yet for the researcher, even this seemed too little time to really do justice to the project.

### *3.4 Researcher: Restricted Autonomy Compare with Freedom of Tourists*

The researcher’s selection of site and topic are dictated to a large extent by the goal of bypassing any topic that might be problematic to their employing institution. University-based researchers must first obtain consent and funding for the project, and approval for the absence from the workplace it might entail. The researcher is then obliged to acquire ethical approval before they can begin the new project.

It is usual for universities employing social scientists to want to play it very safe: a strategy that may be counterproductive, and which probably underpins the apparent “public indifference to sociology” (Beer, 2014, p. 5). The researcher is scrutinised anew with every project. “There is no moment at the start of a

research career when one signs—or articulates—an equivalent to, say, the Hippocratic Oath... solemnly swearing to faithfully execute the role of researcher in a manner which will never place the subjects or the employing institution in a position of disrepute while always behaving in an ethically appropriate manner (Bell, 2015). Instead, every proposed project is vigorously dissected for any potential ethical hazards. This has to be completed before funding can be uplifted, and fieldwork proceed.

Meanwhile, the tourist, whatever their attitude to local people, or whatever the possibility of inappropriate behaviour—say misogyny, xenophobia, paedophilia—can pretty much go wherever they wish. They can get drunk, make a lot of noise, and despoil the streets in unruly stag party pub crawls, “blighting residents” live’ (Tait, 2019). The FIT (Free Independent Tourist) enjoys flexibility and can make decisions on a whim. For the researcher, the safety of the subjects, and the integrity of the researcher and her employing institution, are all at stake. There is no parallel concern for the tourist; there are no compulsory parallel ethical guidelines or demands for them.

Academic researchers are well versed about this requirement, and understand the principles for its necessity. This means they cannot have full autonomy. They are overseen by a bureaucratic elite, which is largely invisible: university website and email communication conceals any *real* people presiding over the rules. “Formal ethics review, a necessary safeguard in theory, can sometimes function as an ill-informed obstruction” (Oakley, 2010, p. 436). The tourist has to pass no such test.

Some research projects require a high level of flexibility. Yet my university’s Ethics Committee requires the opposite. I am asked to provide a list of people to be interviewed. This is despite those interviews being anonymous, and confidential to the researcher. This is also despite the fact that many of them will be unknown to the researcher, until she finds them in the field. Meanwhile the tourist can enjoy casual conversations wherever they wish, needing nobody’s approval. Those official guidelines exclude the possibility of simply going somewhere and finding the appropriate persons, in the way that tourists meet “interesting people”.

Further, the researcher is required to have a firm itinerary. This (if honoured and obeyed by the docile researcher) counters the possibility of valuable serendipitous contacts made in the field.

These frustrations demonstrate issues regarding the “relevance of method” and how it corresponds with the “here and now” (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, p. 3). When the overall agenda is to accumulate data, with the goal of examining the topic as intensely as possible, to construct truthful, lively, high-quality outputs; then an experienced researcher has some insight into what will work, and what will not. Unlike the tourist, the agenda meant that the researcher’s antennae were always alert to any possible fragments of information to feed into the project. They may even choose to quietly bypass their formal promises to Ethics Committee, to get the reliable information their project requires (Bell, 2015).

Tourists do not have to deal with the hindrance of invisible gatekeepers dictating their travels. They too are likely to have budget constraints. But they are unlikely to experience interferences in their time/place management, itineraries, and selection of sites of engagement. Research field trips can be

maddeningly compromised, the researcher envious of the tourist's comparative freedom.

The university's prepaid accommodation requirement is another infuriating hurdle. Travel by academics is organised by a web-based agency unconcerned about matching our individual research finances or agendas. Their offers of "deluxe luxury suites" at my locations were totally inappropriate to (a) my funding (b) the nature of the research itself, and (c) places where I might find social justice projects, or people to interview. Social justice workers do not stay in upmarket accommodation. For an experienced researcher who has often working in developing nations—e.g., Namibia (Bell, 2012), Mongolia (Bell, 2012), Vietnam (Bell & Lyall, 2005)—homestays or small guest houses are the preferred accommodation. This is because the money paid (cash) goes directly to the host family; not to a multinational hotel chain, or www a booking agent, or to a credit card company, all of which channel profits offshore. These matters are also of concern to many tourists. Some homestays do not have web booking facilities; a sign saying "room available" is sufficient invitation. Tourists have the freedom to do this; the researcher does not.

A research funding proposal requesting that the researcher go to, e.g., Cambodia or Myanmar for six weeks and rely on chance discoveries of social good projects, will never succeed. Even an offer to carry out "participant observation" would be dismissed as inappropriate, perhaps looking more like a state-financed holiday than serious academia. The resolute researcher must convey their agenda in terms that their institution will accept; in what Gullimen and Gillam (2004) refer to as "ethics committee gloss".

So for the researcher, this is not supposed to look like a holiday—even though holidays themselves are a significant human practice, with massive implications for every country visited, so therefore an essential topic to research.

So lucky tourists! For academics, the auditing of our research impacts are now at the forefront of our individual career monitoring. It is part of the "materialization of neoliberal ideologies within higher education... linking impact to funding, public engagement and relevance" (Beer, 2014, p. 14). It enforces our compliance as obedient academics, and is probably irreversible. We are indoctrinated to defer to authority, including—especially? —the "ethics police" (Sieber & Tolich, 2012, p. 2). But we are desperate to maintain academic autonomy, and to be trusted to behave appropriately. Those lucky tourists endure no such pressure or restraint, as they visit the same sites, and even ask some of the same people, the very same questions.

#### **4. Conclusions and Implications**

The critics of pro-poor tourism are contradicted by the findings of this research. The suggestion that attempts to alleviate poverty at a local level is best left to government and NGOs, has not proven successful. Historically "cross-country evidence on aid effectiveness is fragile" (Bourguignon & Sundberg, 2007). Plus, that suggestion of delegation denies the value and power of the immediacy that is central to these projects. The viable enterprises that were first visited, then discussed above, provide

a successful model for an increasing range of other such projects. Some initiatives, like the furniture restoration project and the buffalo farming, exemplify altruism conjoined with blue sky thinking.

These projects raise the question of whether it is realistic to address the inequitable nature of global economic relations through reliance on tourists as consumers. Every one of these projects, in common with every other tourism sector, is dependent on the ongoing flow of foreign visitors with money. The assumption is that this will continue. Yet there is potential for mass tourism to crash through global pandemics, terrorism, tougher regulations about carbon miles, and global warming: the warnings are present everyday There is no "Plan B" for these workers.

Meanwhile, in investigating this topic, the researcher could be described as congruent with the (same person; self) tourist: exploring, chatting, consuming, enjoying. This kept the encounters personal, casual and vital. It was imperative to resist anything resembling a formal inspection of each enterprise. The activities recounted here illustrate social research in the real world, and the nexus of tourist/ researcher.

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### **Brief biography of the author**

Claudia Bell, an academic at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, has published extensively in the arena of cultural tourism. Her work has included investigations of polar bear tourism in Canada, cycle trails in New Zealand, backpackers traversing Eastern African countries, international visitors at World Expos in Japan and China, artist-travellers in South Korea and in Bosnia, and tourists seeking

comfort zones in Mongolia. Her main focus since 2012 has been on the nexus of tourism and international retirement migration. Fieldwork for that research has taken place in Bali, Indonesia, Cambodia and Malaysia. Her current funded two year project is about grassroots social justice enterprises aimed at tourists, in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.