

Volunteering with elephants: Is it a way of moving towards global citizenship?

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Abstract

This study examines the nature of European volunteer tourists' experiences at Elephants World, Thailand as well as whether and/or to what extent such experiences foster a sense of global citizenship among them. It used an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative research approach. The informants included 21 volunteer participants from European countries. A combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation was used to gather data. Data were then analysed via a thematic analysis technique, revealing that the experiences of the volunteer tourists were a mixture of general wildlife experiences, experiences related to self-development, and experiences fostering a sense of global citizenship. However, the last dimension of experience was found to represent only the soft mode of global citizenship. Five main obstacles were found to limit the volunteer tourists to become the critical global citizens: language barriers, their short period of participation, the intention and willingness of the volunteer tourists to learn about the root causes of problems in the destination country/host community, the active participation of wider groups of local people, and the volunteer tourists' colonial perspective. These issues should be carefully by host organisations and sending organisations.

Keywords: international conservation volunteer tourism; volunteer tourism experiences, global citizenship; elephants; European tourists; Thailand

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Introduction

Global citizenship is a concept originally arising from discussion about the role of education in inspiring and cultivating students to become globally-minded persons (Morais & Ogden, 2010; Standish, 2012). At present there is no agreed definition of global citizenship. Scholars hold different views of this concept and interpret it based on various contexts (Pak, 2013). Among different interpretations, a widely used approach is to consider global citizenship as attitudes or mindsets that drive awareness of global crises, and demonstrate individuals' responsibilities towards humans and non-humans (not only those in their own countries), by engaging in development activities (Bowden, 2003; Dill, 2013; Gray, Meeker, Ravensbergen, Kipp, & Faulkner, 2017; Morais & Ogden, 2010; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2018; Woolf, 2010). This perspective on global citizenship is adopted in this research. The concept of global citizenship has been promoted in overseas study (Wynveen, Kyle, & Tarrant, 2012), gap year projects, and international tourism with the aim of using these activities to encourage students to acquire a global consciousness on existing and possible problems beyond their nations (Jakubiak & Lordache-Bryant, 2017; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2012), seeing themselves as obligated to resolve these problems (Standish, 2012) by actively playing a part in relevant development issues to make the world a more equal and sustainable place (Butcher, 2017).

International volunteer tourism has widely been promoted as a means of bolstering global citizenship. Global citizenship is argued to closely link with international volunteer tourism (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Butcher, 2017; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Roques, Jacobson, & McCleery, 2018), as the latter involves a journey made by individuals from one country to another, where they spend part of their time doing volunteer work to mitigate or solve problems in that country (Wearing, 2001). In addition, international volunteer tourism is also argued to encourage individuals to become more conscious of global issues (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Rattan, Eagles, & Mair, 2012). It also enables the tourists to have a broader vision of the world (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007) and international understanding (Sherraden, Stringham, Sow, & McBride, 2006) and change their self-centred views of the world to become other-oriented, which can metaphorically be described as changing from 'facing the wall' to turning 'their back to the wall' and experiencing a '180 degree turn' (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007: 118).

International volunteer tourism encompasses a variety of development projects ranging from building houses, taking care of disabled or orphaned children, assisting people affected by natural disasters, teaching in schools, providing medical care, helping in scientific research projects, conserving and protecting nature and/or wildlife (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017; Knollenberg, McGehee, Boley, & Clemmons, 2014; Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014; van Tonder, Hoogendoorn, & Block, 2017). Of interest to this research is a wildlife conservation project that focuses on taking care of elderly and injured elephants in Thailand.

The popularity of the promotion of global citizenship among people, especially young people, and increasing growth in the international conservation volunteer tourism emerged as a response to significant cuts in public funds for nature and wildlife conservation efforts, especially in the Global South, and the attempts to delegate these tasks to citizens (Harvey, 2005; Marston & Mitchell, 2004; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2007). Both non-profit and commercial organisations fill the void left by government by offering various international conservation volunteering projects in Global South countries (Lorimer, 2010) and promoting these projects as a means for inspired individuals to demonstrate their sense of responsibility to the world (Harvey, 2005; Lorimer, 2010; Marston & Mitchell, 2004; Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Although a number of scholars (e.g. Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Butcher, 2017; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Roques *et al.*, 2018) advocate that international conservation volunteer tourism has association to and serves as a means to promote global citizenship, some scholars argue (Mostafanezhad, 2014a; 2014b; Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008; Simpson, 2004; 2005; Sin, 2009; 2010; Vrsti, 2012) that it represents a neoliberal and/or neocolonial mode of citizenship. The debate is ongoing and to date there is yet no agreed upon conclusion on this issue. This is partly because, according to Wearing, Young, & Everingham (2017), volunteer tourism has only recently been rigorously assessed, and there is still very little empirical evidence on its impacts, especially in this regard. They call for more study focusing on the consequences of volunteer tourism. Although during the past decades, researchers and scholars have paid more interest to the association between international conservation volunteer tourism and global citizenship, a majority of such research focused on expeditions to African and South American countries (e.g. Alexander, 2012; Judge, 2017; Roques *et al.*, 2018; Simpson, 2004; 2005; Sin, 2009; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004, and van Tonder *et al.*, 2017), while limited attention has been paid to the context in which Asian countries are the destinations (e.g. Mostafanezhad, 2014a; 2014b; Sin, 2010). The gap in the literature in terms of geographical scope is therefore identified. To gain true understanding of whether and/or to what extent international conservation volunteer tourism can serve as a way to foster global citizenship among participants, research should be conducted from various geographical contexts so that holistic insights can be achieved. Realising this gap in the existing literature, this study focuses on international volunteer tourism taking place in Thailand, with the aim to examine the nature of international conservation volunteer tourism experiences gained by participants from European countries, and whether and/or to what extent these experiences can foster a sense of global citizenship among these participants, as well as the barriers impeding this (if any). This study utilised the conservation volunteer tourism programme at ElephantsWorld, Thailand as a case study.

The concept of volunteering in tourism is diverse and can have different meanings in different contexts (Merrill, 2006). Agreeing with this, Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth (1996) point out that the term 'volunteers' can be very vague, and individuals performing different types of non-salaried activities can be understood as volunteers. It is, therefore, necessary to delimit the concept of volunteer tourism adopted in this study in order to avoid any confusion that may occur. Cnaan *et al.* (1996) attempt to clarify the meaning of 'volunteers' and distinguish between 'pure' and 'broadly defined' volunteers. According to Cnaan *et al.* (1996: 366), the broadest definition of volunteers refers to 'almost everyone who works without full financial compensation', whereas the purest definition refers to 'only those who give extensively of their time and effort without recompense'. They developed a continuum of this pure-to-broad definition of volunteers by considering four dimensions: free choice, remuneration, structure, and intended beneficiaries. Individuals who meet the strictest criteria of each dimension are more likely to be defined as volunteers in the purest sense whereas those who meet with loosest criteria are viewed as volunteers in the broadest perspective. For example, individuals who perform work of their own free will, without remuneration, in a formally organized project or with a formal organization, benefiting people whom they do not know or have nothing in common are considered volunteers in the purest sense (see Cnaan *et al.*, 1996). This study takes the purest definition to define the volunteer tourists in this study.

Moreover, Holmes, Smith, Lockstone-Binney, & Baum (2010), and Gallarza, Arteaga, & Gil-Saura (2013) argue that volunteer tourism encompasses two groups of people: host volunteers and guest volunteers. The former refers to residents who volunteer in their own community or country such as assisting at special events, whereas the latter are tourists who travel to a destination to participate in a certain volunteer activity, and are therefore often referred to as volunteer tourists (Gallarza *et al.*, 2013; Holmes

et al., 2010). Given the nature of volunteer tourism in this study, which examines the experiences of European tourists undertaking volunteer tourism in Thailand, the guest volunteers are the main focus of this study.

Literature Review

Global citizenship

Global citizenship is a widely used concept in higher education (Butcher, 2017; Morais & Ogden, 2010; Pak, 2013; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2018). Many educational institutions, especially in Western countries, have promoted it as a goal or outcome of liberal education effort (Oxley & Morris, 2013) and use it to guide and inspire students to become engaged global citizens (Brown, 2006).

There is still debate on a proper definition of global citizenship. This concept has been interpreted differently, depending on the context (Pak, 2013). However, some scholars (e.g. Bowden, 2003; Dower, 2008; Reysen & Katzarska-Miller, 2018) argue that this term is faulty because it is impossible for anyone to legally be a citizen of the world. They point out that individuals, as citizens of a certain nation, have certain rights and duties to a government of that particular nation, and there is no global government. Therefore, people cannot be legal citizens of every nation nor a globe. In response to this criticism, a number of scholars propose alternative approaches to define the term global citizenship. For example, Bowden (2003) and Woolf (2010) similarly mention that global citizens can be seen as globally-minded individuals. In line with this, Dill (2013: 50) notes that this concept should be considered as an ethos or metaphor, and thus global citizenship can refer to 'a moral ideal, a vision of a person who thinks and acts about the world in specific ways; as a universal community without boundaries whose members care for each other and the planet'. Gray *et al.* (2017) and Morais & Ogden (2010) define global citizenship as rights and a sense of responsibility that individuals have in relation to fellow citizens (and non-human features) beyond one's own particular nation, and a desire to act for the benefits of these citizens (and non-human features). Similarly, Reysen & Katzarska-Miller (2018: 6) note that global citizenship should be described as attitudes and mindsets or psychological categories or constructs of individuals. They also add that the legal view of global citizenship 'fails to acknowledge the power of identities in shaping attitudes and behaviours'.

Morais & Ogden (2010) suggest that the concept of global citizenship is multidimensional, consisting of three main interrelated dimensions: social responsibility, global competence, and global civic engagement. They explain that social responsibility refers to recognition of ones' responsibilities and concern to other people, society and the environment of other countries; global competence can be defined as ones' ability to engage successfully in intercultural encounters with others as well as interest in and knowledge about global issues and one's ability to leverage such knowledge; and finally global civic engagement refers to one's recognition of local, state, national, and global community issues and their actions, such as volunteerism, political activism, and community participation, to respond to such issues.

Andreotti (2006) categorises global citizenship as a soft or thin form of global citizenship and a more critical or thick conception. Soft global citizenship allows people in the Global North to assume that global inequality and problems in the Global South countries mainly result from lack of development and resources such as skills, education, and technology, failing to acknowledge the political and historical processes that play a role in creating problems in these countries (Andreotti, 2006; Daly, 2013). As a result, the actions of these people are likely to reinforce global inequality and reproduce the colonial view among themselves and people in the Global South (Andreotti, 2006; Daly, 2013). In contrast, critical global citizenship drives individuals to learn more about the root causes of global

inequality and other global issues so that they have a true understanding of these issues that enables them to effectively examine their role in changing the structures and systems to resolve these issues (Andreotti, 2006; Cameron, 2013; Daly, 2013).

Andreotti (2006) describes other differences between soft global citizens and critical global citizens. First, soft global citizens feel that they have a responsibility to teach others, whereas critical global citizens seek to learn with others. Second, soft global citizens believe that changes or development should come from 'the outside to the inside', whereas critical global citizens acknowledge the opposite direction. Third, soft global citizens donate their resources and expertise to others, while critical global citizens examine their own role in how to engage in changing structures, identities and assumptions. Fourth, soft global citizens are likely to have a universal assumption of how everyone should live, while critical global citizens engage in reflexivity, dialogue, contingency, and an ethical relation with difference.

International conservation volunteer tourism

International conservation volunteer tourism involves people crossing a national border to support conservation and protection of nature and/or wildlife, enhancement of wildlife welfare, ecosystem research or ecological restoration projects, both in situ and ex situ (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lorimer, 2009; 2010; Rattan *et al.*, 2012; Roques *et al.*, 2018; Wearing, 2001).

International conservation volunteer tourism has experienced rapid growth in the last three decades (Lorimer, 2009) as a result of increasing awareness of global environmental problems, threatened biodiversity, decreasing numbers of particular species, deforestation for agriculture, dams and road construction, and commercialisation (Eagles, 1994; Rattan *et al.*, 2012; Roques *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, dramatic reductions of government budgets for nature and wildlife conservation practices also lead to increased demands for international conservation volunteering (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Eagles, 1994; Lorimer, 2009). Governments of many countries view nature and wildlife conservation practices as a cost to the government budgets or activities that produce little return on investment (Catlin, Hughes, Jones, Jones, & Campbell, 2013). Moreover, they also consider that development in other areas (i.e. education, health, and security) is relatively more important to their nation, thereby setting a low priority on conservation efforts (Alpizar, 2005; Catlin, *et al.*, 2013; Font, Cochrane, & Tapper, 2004). For this reason, agencies and organisations responsible for nature and/or wildlife conservation have often suffered from shortages of financial support and inadequate staff and look for alternative ways to gain additional financial support and manpower such as offering volunteer tourism programmes (Roques *et al.*, 2018). Non-profit organisations also assist these organisations by promoting programmes, recruiting volunteers, and facilitating their journeys to the host communities (Lorimer, 2010). At the same time, for-profit organisations see this as an opportunity to make profit and start offering volunteer tourism programmes involving nature and/or wildlife conservation activities in Global South countries for inspired people, especially those from Global North countries (Lorimer, 2010).

Although international conservation volunteering is now widespread across the world (Wearing *et al.*, 2017), this kind of project normally takes place in tropical countries (Lorimer, 2009). Based on the work of Lorimer (2009), tropical countries can attract up to 73 percent of volunteer tourists and 66 percent of conservation volunteering projects. This type of volunteer tourism can take place at various sites, including national parks, protected areas, wildlife parks (Cousins, Evans, & Sadler, 2009), tropical rainforests, lagoons, beaches (van Tonder *et al.*, 2017), wildlife sanctuaries and wildlife rehabilitation centres (Shackley, 1996). It involves a wide range of activities including providing assistance to wildlife (e.g. taking care of injured animals), interacting with animals (Cong, Wu, Morrison, Shu, & Wang, 2014;

Rattan *et al.*, 2012; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004) and working with professionals or scientists on specific conservation research projects (e.g. collecting data on specific species, and monitoring wildlife and the environment) (Brightsmith, Stronza, & Holle, 2008; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Lepp, 2009). The characteristics of international conservation volunteer tourism and the locations where it takes place cause this type of volunteer tourism to overlap with other forms of tourism, such as nature-based tourism, ecotourism, wildlife tourism, scientific tourism, and environmental research tourism (Lo & Lee, 2011).

A number of existing studies similarly point out that common motivations driving individuals to take part in international conservation volunteer tourism include a desire to support or contribute to nature/wildlife conservation/protection (Broad, 2003; Proyrungroj, 2020; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012); a desire to gain practical skills, knowledge and experience (Tomazos & Cooper, 2012; van Tonder *et al.*, 2017); to have proximate interactions with wildlife (Lorimer, 2010; McIntosh & Wright, 2017; Schänzel & McIntosh, 2000); and personal fondness for certain types of wildlife (Lorimer, 2010; van Tonder *et al.*, 2017).

As for the experiences gained by individuals through international conservation volunteer tourism, a number of existing works agree that this form of volunteer tourism provides meaningful experiences for the volunteer tourists. A review of existing literature (Broad, 2003; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lepp, 2009; Roques *et al.*, 2018; Wearing, 2001) suggests two common dimensions of experiences expressed by international conservation volunteer tourists: self-related and personal growth; and emotion. In terms of the self-related and personal growth dimension, conservation volunteer experiences are argued to be transformative learning in nature (Broad, 2003; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lepp, 2009; Wearing, 2001) and potentially enable volunteer tourists to learn and develop multiple skills (e.g. self-confidence, interpersonal or social skills, communications skills, and problem-solving) during the expedition as well as enjoying forms of personal development. These skills not only build up the volunteer tourists' CV (Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2005), but they also benefit in future study and working life (O'Reilly, 2006; Söderman, N., & Snead, 2008). International conservation volunteering also enables participants to reflect on and evaluate their own 'selves'. In other words, these experiences help individuals learn about themselves and become aware of new things such as their own potential. The study by Harlow & Pomfret (2007) reveals that participants in the conservation project in Kafue National Park in Zambia discovered new abilities and areas of interest, such as animal identification, that gave them a sense of pride and achievement. The same study also reports that volunteer tourists become more conscious about natural resources and global issues as a result of first-hand experiences of scarcity of water and the effort to gain access to it in the area. As for the emotional dimension, existing research (Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Higginbottom & Tribe, 2004; McIntosh & Wright, 2017; Taylor, Hurst, Stinson, & Grimwood, 2020) suggest that proximity to nature and/or wildlife is the main factor contributing to a meaningful experience for participants. Being and working in a natural environment and/or with wildlife facilitates volunteer tourists to gradually develop a deep emotional connection with the natural environment/wildlife, which in turn led to a greater appreciation of these things. However, Gray & Campbell (2007) report that negative feeling can also occur among the volunteer tourists who expect to see animals, but do not. In their study, some volunteer tourists reported that they were very disappointed because they did not see turtles, which were supposed to be the highlight of the project.

Moreover, Wearing & Neil (2000) argue that the volunteer tourism experience is a process of learning in which the natural features and aesthetic qualities of the volunteer tourism destination play an important role. They also add that the physical and psychological distance of the volunteer tourism destination provide a range of opportunities for volunteer tourists to engage in social interactions with

the host community and natural environment, which in turn allows them to change how they feel about themselves, their lifestyle, and how they regard the social and natural environment, from focusing less on 'self' and placing more emphasis on 'others'.

International conservation volunteering is also argued to benefit host organisations and/or host communities. Existing literature (Brondo, 2015; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Lorimer, 2010; Roques *et al.*, 2018; Rattan *et al.*, 2012; Wearing, 2004) reports that it helps promote the protection and enhancement of wildlife welfare or the conservation of biodiversity and natural environment by providing financial support as well as manpower and skills. However, this form of volunteer tourism as well as its other forms have been criticised as just another tourism product designed for a profit-making purpose for the host organisations and/or volunteer sending organisations (Cousins *et al.*, 2009; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012). It is also argued to represent a commodification of nature/wildlife welfare (Godfrey, 2018; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Smith & Font, 2014). A number of for-profit companies seek to make monetary profit by selling international conservation experiences (Alexander, 2012; Cousins *et al.*, 2009; Godfrey, 2018). In order to ensure the satisfaction of participants, these companies design volunteer activities based on the needs of the tourists, rather than for the benefit of the host communities (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Therefore, these conservation projects may potentially do more harm than good to nature and/or wildlife. Despite these criticisms, international conservation volunteering, if properly managed, can serve as a solution to the problems of funds and labour in organisations responsible for nature/wildlife conservation.

Association between international conservation volunteer tourism and global citizenship

International conservation volunteering can be seen as a means to promote global citizenship among participants (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Butcher, 2017, Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Roques *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, it is often viewed as a platform through which participants can demonstrate their awareness of the global problems and exercise their global responsibilities by acting in an ethical way towards humans (and non-humans) in distant places (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Butcher & Smith, 2015). According to official United Nations publications, international volunteer tourism is considered a part of civil society that balances the roles of the government and the private sector (Talcott, 2011), and it helps shift the weight of social responsibility from governments and nations to non-local actors such as volunteer tourists from overseas (Vrasti, 2012). This tourism activity allows active, aspirational citizens to deliver public services in places beyond their own nations (Lorimer, 2010; Schattle, 2008).

Educational institutions, non-profit organisations, private volunteer sending organisations and tour operators, especially those in the Western countries, actively promote global citizenship among young people and encourage them to participate in various activities including international conservation volunteering expeditions in distant places (Butcher, 2017, Butcher & Smith, 2010; Desforges, 2004; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2004). Additionally, they also invoke a sense of global citizenship through the use of marketing material (Butcher, 2017, Zeddies & Millet, 2015). This material often presents the world as flat, open, with fluid borders that makes distant places easily accessible and intimate (Anderson, 1991; Lorimer, 2010). These distant places are described as full of 'equal' opportunities for difference-making (Lorimer, 2010; Zeddies & Millet, 2015). According to Zeddies & Millet (2015: 103), and this flat, open world is totalised as 'global civil society'. Text and images in marketing material contribute to shaping such a worldview among individuals (Zeddies & Millet, 2015) and encourage them to believe that making a difference and undertaking development in distant places is simple (Simpson, 2004). Various global citizenship benefits are also presented, such as 'having the chance to build skills', 'gaining experience and connections to be leaders of change' (Raleigh International, 2021), 'unlocking your potential as a

global citizen', and 'learning and practicing important skills' (United Planet, 2021). According to Butcher (2017), the link between volunteering overseas and global citizenship benefits in terms of employability is often present in these materials. The 'distant places' described as sites for individuals to exercise their global responsibility are often poor, developing countries in the Global South (Lorimer, 2010) that are simultaneously presented as stable and safe for volunteer tourists to visit (Lorimer, 2010; Zeddies & Millet, 2015).

International volunteer tourism is presented as an opportunity for people to develop the capacities, attributes, and values apposite to global citizen, specifically a critical understanding of inequality occurring in the different parts of the world (Judge, 2017), a desire to fight for a more equal world (Judge, 2017), a part in solving global problems and furthering international development (Schattle, 2008) and engaging in genuine cross-cultural exchange with people residing in distant places, which in turn develops an acceptance and tolerance of cultural diversity (Jones, 2005; McGehee, 2012a; Raymond & Hall, 2008). Moreover, international volunteer tourism can also lead to the establishment of long-term relationships with people and social networks that promote social movements and activism (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

However, there is substantial debate as to whether international volunteer tourism experiences, especially those involved in conservation, actually foster global citizenship. In addition to the criticism related to the commodification of nature/wildlife mentioned above, many scholars (e.g. Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Borland & Adams, 2013; Everingham, 2018; Everingham & Motto, 2020; Godfrey, 2018; Gray *et al.*, 2017; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2008; Simpson, 2004; 2005; Sin, 2009; 2010; Vrsti, 2012; Zeddies & Millei, 2015) point out that due to its neoliberal and neocolonial features, this tourism activity may reinforce, rather than challenge, global inequality and the unbalanced relationship between aid-providers in the Global North (volunteer tourists) and aid-receivers in the Global South (local residents). Such reinforcement occurs because international conservation volunteer tourism is often a one-way traffic from the Global North to the Global South (Lorimer, 2010, 4; Lyons, *et al.*, 2012). Lorimer (2010: 314) points out that such one-way traffic represents 'the postcolonial persistence of tourist route' and 'networks of patronage'. In the international volunteer tourism host-guest relationship, volunteer tourists are normally viewed, by themselves and host community residents, as privileged in terms of their global mobility and resources (i.e. time and money), allowing them to travel across borders to take part in conservation activities, whereas host community residents cannot enjoy such privileges (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Gray *et al.*, 2017; Judge, 2017).

In addition, volunteer tourists are also encouraged by non-profit organisations, volunteer-sending organisations or tour operators to be the main actors in the relationship, whereas local people are seen as the 'second-class citizens' who are often denied responsibility for the conservation actions in their own community (Zeddies & Millei, 2015: 103). Agreeing with this, Gray *et al.* (2017) report that volunteer tourists in Belize perceived themselves as knowledge generators and providers, and the local people as recipients of this knowledge. In addition, local people and their communities in the Global South are often depicted in the marketing material of the volunteer-sending organisations/tour operators as passive recipients of volunteer tourists' help (Zeddies & Millei, 2015). Therefore, many volunteer tourists perceive that only they can enjoy the position of global citizens, and they are the agents of change who are responsible for the well-being of the local people. In addition, non-profit organisations and commercial organisations related to volunteer tourism also often treat local people as passive victims of an unfair world or objects of development for volunteer tourists (Vrsti, 2012), and their communities seen as places of development (Zeddies & Millei, 2015). Treating local people and the host communities in the Global South as objects can also be considered as a commodified form of volunteer tourism

(Zeddies & Millei, 2015). The exclusivity of volunteer tourists as the sole global citizens and the exclusion of local residents in the volunteer tourism relationship suggests that global citizenship should be extended to all individuals, not just volunteer tourists, so that a reciprocal relationship from which all actors can benefit can occur (Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012).

International conservation volunteer tourism has also been criticised as a form of economic neoliberalism (Baillie-Smith & Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2011; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Simpson, 2005; Sin, Oakes, & Mostafanezhad 2015; Vrasti, 2012), as it is often viewed by individuals, especially young people, as an opportunity for them to acquire social capital. Agreeing with this, some researchers (Butcher, 2017; Guttentag, 2009; Sin, 2009) also argue that volunteer tourists are more motivated to fulfil their own needs relating to 'self' development than to contribute to the host community or the host community's desire for development. To echo this notion, Butcher (2017: 131) points out that this tourism activity is rather focusing on encouraging participants to "bring home" the lessons learned abroad about how to live a more sustainable and co-operative life, instead of directing [their energy] at transforming poverty to wealth'. Many volunteer tourists use their experiences to develop marketable skills, consume legitimate experiences, add competitiveness to their CV (Gray *et al.*, 2017; Judge, 2017; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2014; Vrasti, 2012; Wearing & McGehee, 2013), and construct themselves as 'competitive, entrepreneurial, market-based, individualised actors and caring, responsible, active global citizens' (Sin *et al.*, 2015: 122). This view represents neoliberal modes of 'consumer citizenship' rather than a move towards global citizenship. Moreover, Vrasti (2012) notes that the perception of the host community residents as passive victims of an unfair world also represents a process of cultivating the cultural capital and entrepreneurial competencies of the volunteer tourists.

Despite these criticisms, some researchers (Cameron, 2013; Conran, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2017) suggest that this form of tourism activity may not yet constitute a sense of critical global citizenship among the participants, but can foster a soft form of global citizenship that can be an important step for stakeholders in this sector to find more ethical and reciprocal ways to promote critical global citizenship. McGehee (2012a) notes that all forms of international volunteer tourism serve as a means to establishing broader transnational networks and reframing the relationship between people in the Global North and those in the Global South because they bring distant people into close contact. Furthermore, some researchers (e.g. Devereux, 2008; McGehee, 2012a; Smith, 2014; Wearing, 2010) suggest that the decommodification of volunteer tourism can be an effective way to challenge the neoliberal features of international conservation volunteer tourism, thereby allowing a sense of global citizenship to be developed among the tourists. These researchers point out that decommodified volunteer tourism allows tourists to become aware of global inequality and problems. Moreover, Wearing (2010) states that in the decommodified form of volunteer tourism, 'genuine' cross-cultural exchange between the volunteer tourists and the host community residents can occur, and this enables the volunteer tourists to gain an in-depth understanding of the political and historical context of the host community. Further, Brondo (2015) and Gray *et al.* (2017) add that host community residents must be integrated into core activities, and through this means, global citizenship can be extended to all actors in volunteer tourism. Similarly, Wearing (2010) point out that local residents must define and manage conservation practices that correspond to their real needs.

Study site

This study was undertaken at an elephant sanctuary called ElephantsWorld or *Bann Chor Change Chara* in Thai. It is situated in Kachanaburi Province, Thailand, approximately 180 kilometres from Bangkok. The province has long been a popular destination for both domestic and foreign tourists seeking for

historical and nature-based tourism, due to places that were built during the Japanese Occupation of Thailand in the Second World War and its natural beauty and attractions.

ElephantsWorld is a self-supporting elephant protection organisation. It was first founded in 2008 with the main purpose of providing a safe shelter for elderly and injured elephants. At the beginning, there were only a few elephants under the care of the place, therefore revenues from fundraising activities were sufficient for purchasing food for the elephants and operating the place. However, as the number of elephants has gradually increased, the place required more food for the elephants and had to hire more staff and mahouts. Therefore, it started offering tourism activities for visitors on one-day visits as well as volunteer tourism programmes for both foreigners and locals. At the time of undertaking this study, the sanctuary had around thirty elephants and 130 staff and mahouts (ElephantsWorld, 2020).

The opportunity for volunteer tourism is available all year round. There are approximately 15-25 volunteer tourists each month. The majority of the participants are from European countries, while very few participants are Thai. A typical stay is 3-14 days. The programme has no requirement of a minimum stay for volunteers. The volunteer placement fee includes on-site accommodation and three meals a day, but the cost of transportation is not included in the fee (ElephantsWorld, 2020). Volunteers are required to taking care of the elephants during the day. Regular work including feeding fruits and vegetable to the elephants, preparing sticky rice balls for old elephants, bathing them at the river and taking them to sleeping areas. In addition, when same-day visitors come to the site, they help local staff show visitors around the site and explain the history of the sanctuary (ElephantsWorld, 2020).

This volunteer tourism programme was selected as a case for this study because it is unique and interesting in its own right. This sanctuary is unlike many other elephant sanctuaries in Thailand which arrange elephant shows and train elephants to entertain visitors: this place is only a shelter or retirement home for old, sick and injured elephants. The elephants here are allowed to live and roam naturally in the sanctuary area and the forest nearby, providing them with the opportunity to live in their natural environment.

Research methodology

This study examined the experiences of European tourists participating in a volunteer tourism programme at ElephantsWorld, Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, as well as whether and/or to what extent such experiences foster a sense of global citizenship among these volunteer tourists. It also looked at the obstacles (if any) to volunteer tourists gaining a sense of global citizenship. As this study was primarily based on the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the data gained from the respondents as well as her encounters with them during the fieldwork, an interpretive research paradigm utilising qualitative methods was deemed a good fit (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). In addition, the emic perspective gained through a qualitative research enabled the researcher to obtain a better understanding of how the respondents made sense of and interpreted their volunteer tourism experiences (Jennings, 2011; Ruddell, 2017).

Before starting the main fieldwork, the research carried out a pilot study over a three-week period at ElephantsWorld in order to test the effectiveness of the data collection techniques, especially the interview guide, in eliciting data that could fulfil the research objectives (Jennings, 2011). As a consequence of the pilot study, some questions were revised as they were ambiguous or could not produce rich description, and some questions were added. During the main fieldwork period, the researcher made a total of ten 3-4 day-field trips to the study site in order to conduct individual semi-

structured interviews and participant observation. The former served as the primary tool to collect the data, whereas the latter was used to gain supplementary data.

The rationale for using semi-structured interviews lies in enabling a researcher to obtain rich data because a researcher can clarify questions to interviewees (Carey, 2013). If the answers given by interviewees are unclear or too brief, this technique allows a researcher to probe for clarification (Carey, 2013). In this study, the research developed an interview guide containing the main topics to be explored, which helped ensure that all the research questions enabled the researcher to capture rich data that could fulfil the research objectives (McGehee, 2012b). The questions centred around the experiences that the respondents have gained from participating in volunteer tourism at ElephantsWorld, how significant these experiences are and will be for their life, and how and how far these experiences impact their behaviour and sense of global citizenship. All interviews were conducted in English. They were video-recorded upon gaining a consent form from the interviewees. Each interview lasted 50-90 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed in full later. All the interviewees were ensured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their information by the use of pseudonyms. Individual in-depth interviews were continued until the answers become repetitive, or the data saturation was reached.

Although semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool, the researcher also collected data through participant observation, conducted in a form of 'participant as observer' based on Junker's (1960) categorisation, in which the respondents are aware of a researcher's identity and his/her role as a researcher. She first tried to establish a rapport with the respondents by engaging in volunteer activities and conversation with the volunteers. This technique not only allowed her to observe the behaviour of, and activities performed by, the respondents, but also helped her to gain the trust of the respondents (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). After some level of rapport was established, the researcher requested interviews. This technique made the respondents more comfortable and willing to share information with the researcher. Observation was also carried out during interviews, observing tone of voice, facial expressions and other body language of the interviewees, which could help her to understand their perspectives better. The observation continued after the interviews with the aim of gaining additional data and a sense of the key issues found in individual interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). As a result, some interesting stories were shared during informal conversations with the respondents. Such information was used to gain a more complete picture and understanding of the nature of the volunteer tourists' experiences (Denscombe, 2014). The researcher recorded the information gained from observation in field notes, which were organised chronologically throughout the main study.

The study drew data from 21 respondents, who were European tourists participating in the volunteer tourism programme at the ElephantsWorld. The number of respondents were defined by the saturation point of the data. These respondents were selected via purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used because ElephantsWorld was an enclosed site where all the volunteer tourists stayed. The researcher had very good cooperation from all the volunteer tourists participating in the programme. The criteria for selecting the respondents were determined, especially in terms of the period of time the participants spent at ElephantsWorld, in order to ensure that they had sufficient experiences that could yield valuable insights. These criteria were: (i) being tourists from European countries; (ii) eighteen years old and above for ethical reasons; (iii) participating in the volunteer programme at ElephantsWorld for at least two weeks; and (iv) being able to communicate in English.

In terms of the respondents' profile, the proportion of female respondents was higher than male (13 out of 21), with age ranging from 19-49 years. The majority were from the United Kingdom and France, accounting for seven people from each country; the rest consisted of four from Sweden and three from Spain. In terms of educational background, six had completed high school, twelve had a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree, and another was currently studying for a PhD. Their occupations were diverse, ranging from being freelancers, business owners, and employees of private companies or public organisations. The profiles of the respondents as well as the interview details are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Profile of the respondents*

Name	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Country of Origin	Occupation
VT1	M	27	Single	Master's degree	France	PhD student
VT2	F	19	Single	High school	France	Student
VT3	F	19	Single	High school	United Kingdom	Student
VT4	F	25	Married	Bachelor's degree	France	Hotel receptionist
VT5	M	29	Single	Bachelor's degree	France	Tourism entertainment manager
VT6	F	30	Single	Bachelor's degree	United Kingdom	Driving instructor
VT7	M	25	Single	Bachelor's degree	Sweden	Freelancer
VT8	F	33	Single	High school	Spain	Nanny
VT9	F	20	Single	High school	France	Student
VT10	F	49	Married	Bachelors' degree	Sweden	Civil servant
VT11	M	35	Married	Bachelor's degree	Sweden	Computer consultant
VT12	F	23	Single	Bachelor's degree	United Kingdom	Freelancer
VT13	F	25	Single	Bachelor's degree	France	Freelancer
VT14	F	19	Single	High school	United Kingdom	Student
VT15	F	37	Married	Bachelor's degree	Spain	Housewife
VT16	M	39	Married	Bachelor's degree	Spain	Self-employed
VT17	F	31	Single	Bachelor's degree	France	Master's student
VT18	M	32	Married	Bachelor's degree	Sweden	Computer programmer
VT19	F	28	Single	Bachelors' degree	United Kingdom	Master's student
VT20	M	34	Single	Bachelors' degree	United Kingdom	Business owner

Name	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Country of Origin	Occupation
VT21	M	19	Single	High school	United Kingdom	Student

Source: Researcher's own work

This study used deductive thematic analysis by following the steps, suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). The researcher first transcribed the interviews and analysed the data manually to become familiar with them. Then, she searched for meaning and patterns in the data in order to identify codes. All the identified codes were reviewed and sorted into themes. Once all the themes were identified and named, the data were re-read to ensure that the themes accurately represented the meaning of the data and corresponded to the research objectives.

Findings

This section presents the key themes arising from the thematic data analysis of European volunteer tourists' experiences at ElephantsWorld. With the aim of reflecting the respondents' 'true voice', interview excerpts are interspersed with the interpretation of the findings, with the respondents referred to by codes (e.g. VT1, VT2 etc.) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, the excerpts from the field notes taken by the researcher are presented where appropriate in the interests of completeness. Based on the data analysis, the experiences of the volunteer tourists were found to be mixed of general wildlife experiences, experiences related to self-development, and experiences fostering a sense of global citizenship. The last dimension of experience was found to represent only the soft mode of global citizenship. Each dimension is discussed below.

For most respondents, their experiences were found to encompass all three aspects of mentioned. Only three respondents had only the general wildlife experience and those related to self-development. Among the first group, many respondents explained each of these dimensions separately without linking them together, whereas some respondents linked either their wildlife experiences (four respondents) or self-development experiences (three respondents) with a sense of global citizenship, explaining that the former experiences had influenced or led them to develop global citizenship.

General wildlife experiences

In terms of the general wildlife experiences, all respondents said that they were very satisfied by the opportunity to have close interactions with elephants. The respondents explained that they could not have a similar opportunity in their home countries, where they could only see elephants from a distance, such as at a zoo or a circus. Some respondents had never seen real live elephants before. Many of them stated that volunteering was the best way to have proximate interactions with elephants, because they could touch, hug, feed and bathe them in the river. For many volunteer tourists, the last activity served as the highlight. Many respondents also added that the natural setting of ElephantsWorld was a very significant factor in enabling them to have authentic encounters and emotional connection with the elephants. They felt that the natural setting allowed the elephants to exhibit natural behaviours. Such authenticity was highly valued by the respondents as creating meaningful experiences for them.

More than half the respondents mentioned that they were amazed by the characteristics and behaviours of the elephants, not only because of their massive size and strength, but also their charm, discipline and intelligence. Five respondents stated that after spending time with the elephants, they had learnt a lot more about the elephants' behaviours which made them respect these animals because they felt that

the elephants were much in common with humans e.g. they have emotions, the ability to learn and very long lives. For example, VT14 said:

I get to know more about the elephants' life, and I feel that I have to respect them. They are very much like humans". According to the respondents, the behaviours of the elephants created a sense of reverence and respect in them, especially when they interacted with the aged elephants.

V13 explained that *"it made me feel like I am talking to senior people.* Some respondents also added that the sense of respect they had for the elephants made them feel deeply emotionally connected to these animals and want to do more for them. These respondents stated that they were planning to initiate activities involving elephant protection, such as running campaigns against street-begging elephants and poaching. Three respondents said that they planned to return to ElephantsWorld next year, and another two planned to raise funds for the elephants when they returned home. VT8 explained that close interactions with the elephants have totally changed her perception on these wild animals. She said that she was very scared of and has never trusted elephants before because she has seen news of Thai elephants attacking and injuring people. However, after spending time taking care of the elephants at ElephantsWorld for a week, she now was very fond of the elephants and wanted to do volunteering with elephants in the future.

The experiences of the volunteer tourists mentioned above are considered general wildlife experiences because they represent the respondents' feeling of excitement and their passion for elephants as well as their emotional connection with them, similar to the findings reported in research on wildlife tourism experiences (Cong *et al.*, 2014; McIntosh & Wright, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2020). For some respondents, their explanation revealed that the feelings they have for elephants were strong enough to create a sense of global citizenship. Specifically, these respondents revealed that their emotional connection to elephants made them want to help these elephants and resolve difficulties they were facing (e.g. sickness, injuries, insufficient food, and gastrointestinal problem of aged elephants). They also had more concern about the problems of elephants in Thailand, and why elephants needed to be taken care of by ElephantsWorld. Some volunteer tourists, as mentioned above, intended to engage in elephant protection activities in the future, both in Thailand and beyond.

Experiences related to self-development

All the respondents mentioned that the volunteering experiences at ElephantsWorld helped them to develop a range of skills including self-confidence, patience, adapting to an unfamiliar environment, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and problem-solving. Among these, the most cited was self-confidence. Many of the respondents similarly indicated that the skills they have gained resulted from encountering challenges in unfamiliar situations, such as doing things they have never done before (e.g. living and working alone, working with people from different backgrounds and doing physical work) and having to deal with difficulties (e.g. language barriers and difficult volunteering tasks) without any help from others. The majority of respondents also noted that these skills would augment their education/career because they could enhance their qualifications and personality and make their CV more competitive. VT19 mentioned that volunteering *"not only serves as a signal to your future boss that you are a proactive person who spend your time wisely, but it also indicates that you are a hard worker who have certain skills and a growth mindset."*

Many respondents added that they have learnt a lot about elephants' behaviours. They said that before visiting ElephantsWorld, they either had limited or no knowledge of elephants. In addition to a brief orientation at the beginning of the programme, they primarily gained knowledge from the staff, the

mahouts, and the interpretation materials at the site such as posters, brochures, booklets, signs and videos. They also observed close interactions with the elephants. For them, volunteering enabled them to gain more in-depth knowledge about elephants that was different from and more effective than reading from books and/or watching wildlife documentaries, because they could see, hear, touch and observe real elephants for themselves. For example, VT9 stated:

Before coming here, I knew nothing about elephants. I just saw them on TV and in books. But here I got to know a lot more about them...I have learnt from the orientation that we had when we first came here, and also from the mahouts and the booklets. I have also learnt some of their behaviours when I fed them and took a bath for them...You can get this kind of knowledge only when you volunteer.

The above mentioned experiences are not considered global competence (one of the three dimensions of global citizenship) because they are centred around the volunteer tourists themselves; in other words, they are self-oriented experiences because, based on the explanation of the respondents, they focused on how these skills/knowledge could help them to become more competitive. However, for some respondents, some knowledge was very intriguing and had an impact on their perspectives on and/or future actions with elephants. For example, VT21 explained that:

I never knew before that the elephant's back was a very vulnerable part of its body, and that only one adult riding on its back could cause pain to it. I felt very guilty because I used to visit one elephant camp in Chiang Mai before and my sister and I rode on the elephant's back. At that time, I was having fun. I felt very guilty when one of the mahouts told me about this. I will never do this again, and I will tell everyone I know about this and ask them to stop riding on the elephant's back.

VT20 also mentioned that he learnt from orientation that old elephants lose the ability to chew and digest food because their teeth wore down from grinding and chewing plants all the time, and if they roamed around in the forest, they could starve. He added that this knowledge had a very strong impact on him and made him feel great pity for the old elephants. This also made him understand the purpose of the establishment of ElephantsWorld as a shelter for old elephants, and he became more willing to prepare sticky rice balls for the old elephants. He also mentioned that he decided to extend his volunteering time at ElephantsWorld for another one month and was also planning to return with his family next year. Similarly, V17 mentioned that the knowledge of elephants she gained while volunteering at ElephantsWorld made her decide to extend her trip at the site for another two weeks.

I joined the orientation with VT20 and personally found that the content of the orientation also made me feel in the same way as he did. During lunch, after the orientation, I had conversation with VT20 and found that he was very determined to help the old elephants here. He told me that he was going to ask his parents, sisters, and friends to join him here at ElephantsWorld next month. [Excerpt from a field note]

It can be seen from VT21, VT20, and VT17 that they connected their new knowledge of elephants with a sense of global citizenship; in other words, such knowledge made them aware of the difficulties of elephants in Thailand and influenced them to act to help these elephants.

A sense of global citizenship

Lastly, the data analysis reveals that volunteering experiences at ElephantsWorld could foster a sense of global citizenship for the majority of respondents. All three dimensions of global citizenship,

including social responsibility, global competence, and global civic engagement, as introduced by Morais & Ogden (2010), were identified.

In terms of social responsibility, the respondents demonstrated their awareness of and concern for the problems of elephants in Thailand. They perceived that such problems were one issue among many causing inequality in the world. They also felt that, as members of the world, participating in the volunteer programme at ElephantsWorld was a good way to take responsibility. This notion is illustrated by VT7 as follows:

I am from the country where there are less problems, and for myself, I have abilities and time to travel. I also have disposable money and labour to help humans and non-humans in poorer countries like Thailand and other Asian countries. So, why not using these to do good things? It is worthwhile. It is the way that I can show my responsibility to the world.

A similar notion was shared by many other respondents. Common expressions among these respondents included “it is our responsibility to help out”, “we have abilities and resources to help these wildlife” and “there is need for our help here”. For these respondents, being members of rich, developed countries has made them more capable than people in Thailand in terms of accessing resources (money, time, and manpower) and ability to travel. Such capabilities have also led them to feel obliged to solve the problems in the country.

As for global competence, the respondents believed that after working with other volunteer tourists, staff and mahouts, they were more competent than others. Their competence can be categorised into two: their ability to adapt themselves to work and live with people from different cultures; and their knowledge about elephants. For the former, many respondents said that they had learnt to adapt themselves and their way of communication which enabled them to get on and work more comfortably with people they never met. For the latter, respondents indicated that after working with the staff and mahouts, they had learnt many things about the elephants such as elephant’s behaviours and habits, how to interact with elephants, how to take care them properly, and how to promote their well-being. They found this knowledge very interesting and were eager to share it. In addition, some respondents added that when they helped staff welcome groups of same-day visitors, they shared their knowledge with visitors, and were very proud when they could make the visitors interested in the elephants and their well-being. VT14 said that “I have learnt so many new things about the elephants and I am eager to share this to my friends”, and VT15 stated that:

Yesterday when I led a group tour, I shared what I have learnt [about the elephants] to the visitors, and they were really interested...Two of them would like to volunteer here because of the story I told them. I am very proud of myself that I can inspire others to care about the issue that concerns me.

Notions of global competence and self-development experiences mentioned above may seem similar, but they differ. The former, according to Morais & Ogden (2010), focuses on individuals’ intercultural communication ability and global knowledge as well as their ability to share such knowledge with others and encourage them to be concerned about global problems. These competences are other-oriented in that they allow the respondents to have interactions and cross-cultural exchanges with other people as well share knowledge, whereas self-development experiences are more self-oriented.

In terms of global civic engagement, some respondents mentioned that the experiences they have gained from volunteering at ElephantsWorld have inspired them to do more for the world because they

have recognised their responsibility and ability to make the world better. As mentioned earlier, some respondents were planning to raise funds for the elephants at this site when they returned home, while others planned to return to volunteer again in the near future, and others wanted to take part in the elephant protection activities, both in Thailand and beyond. All of these expressions suggest an intention to engage in activities that could help resolve the problems of elephants in Thailand and beyond, which reflects the global civic engagement dimension of global citizenship.

As mentioned, data analysis demonstrated that the experiences gained by respondents only reflect soft global citizenship. The respondents were aware of the problems of elephants in Thailand (i.e. significant decline in the number of wild elephants, poaching for ivory and elephant calves, illegal capture of wild elephants for tourism purposes, and wild elephants illegally roaming the street for money etc.). Some said that have learnt about these from the media in their own countries, while others learnt about these from the orientation given by the staff of ElephantsWorld and the interpretation material (e.g. brochures, posters, booklets, signboards, and videos etc.) around the site. However, based on the interviews, the respondents viewed these problems as 'passive issues' i.e. things that have existed in Thailand for some time and that were among many problems in Thailand, which is a poor, developing country. The respondents did not have in-depth knowledge of the root causes of such problems nor pay much attention to or show interest in learning about these: they felt that these problems were the results of the government's lack of budget and proper action for wildlife protection. This sentiment was reflected in the statements of VT₂ and VT₃, as follows:

I know that the number of elephants in Thailand have been dramatically dropping. Many elephants have been illegally captured for tourism purposes. Some of them are roaming on the street...These are the results of a poor government action on elephant protection of the country...They are parts of many problems found in a developing country, like Thailand. (V₂)

There are also the same problems like this in other developing countries because the governments of these countries including Thailand have no sufficient budget for nature and wildlife conservation. That's why we need to be here to share what we have, like money and time, to help the elephants. (VT₃)

The respondents were also aware of the limitations of ElephantsWorld in terms of budget and labour shortage, and similarly they felt that these limitations would continue to remain. Therefore, according to the respondents, their contribution through donating and assisting the staff to take care of the elephants at ElephantsWorld would be necessary as long as Thailand is poor, and the Thai government did not have sufficient budget or policies to protect elephants. When asked whether and how they could resolve the problems of elephants in Thailand and the difficulties faced by ElephantsWorld, all respondents said that volunteering was the best thing they could do to help, because they were just students or ordinary citizens who did not have much power to change the structure or policies of the country. This notion was clearly expressed by VT₁₀ who said that, "What we are doing here is better than doing nothing...We are doing our bit, and I believe this can surely contribute to the protection of elephants in the country, more or less". VT₁₄ also commented that:

We are just students or ordinary people who stay here for a very short time. What we can only do is to donate money, time, and labour. This is the way we can contribute to the protection of elephants in Thailand. The fee that we paid and money that we donated can be used to purchase food to feed the elephants and pay for the utility bills and wages for the staff and mahouts.

The above statements indicate that, in the view of several respondents, they were not in the position to eliminate the problems of elephants in Thailand or at ElephantsWorld, but they could help by donating money, time and labour. Their volunteering was only part of a broader movement toward these problems. The respondents also noted that these problems were too complicated for them, and therefore these must be in the hand of the Thai government and the non-profit organisations interested in elephants. Some of the respondents added that volunteering was a way for people from richer, developed countries, who have more financial ability, to assist poorer countries.

These expressions reflect soft global citizenship, which assumes that problems in poor, developing countries are the results of lack of resources such as money, technology and education. This perspective considers problems at a surface level, thereby failing to acknowledge the root causes of the problems, which are parts of the political and historical context and processes of these countries. In addition, it is evident from the data that the respondents expressed the colonial view that people from the Global North could simply take part in solving the problems of another country by participating in a volunteer tourism project, which was perceived as one of the best ways to share their resources with another country.

Obstacles impeding the volunteer tourists to become critical global citizens

Although the volunteer tourism experiences at ElephantsWorld were found to foster a sense of (soft) global citizenship, they did not have sufficient power to create critical global citizens. The data analysis revealed several obstacles to this, which included language barriers, short visits, respondents' intentions and willingness to learn about the root causes of elephants' problems in Thailand and at ElephantsWorld, the active participation of local people, and their own colonial viewpoint.

For language barriers, many respondents said that even though there were some staff who could speak English and helped translate when they communicated with other non-English speaking staff and mahouts, they still have difficulty to interact with these people. Language barriers limited their opportunities to learn more about elephants.

Many respondents have difficulties to communicate with the staff members and the mahouts because there were only two staff who can speak English, and these staff are not always available to help them translate. Therefore, the volunteer tourists try to use body language to communicate, but it is not always successful. Some of them are very frustrated with this difficulty. [Excerpt from a field note]

In terms of length of participation, while many respondents were satisfied and believed that the time they spent at ElephantsWorld was sufficient for them to gain a meaningful experience, some respondents recognised that their participation was too brief to enable them to learn about the problems of elephants more deeply. They believed that if they had had more time, they would have understood better how to help elephants in Thailand more effectively and actively. This perspective was largely shared during the informal conversations between the researcher and the respondents.

As for the respondents' intentions and willingness to learn about the root causes of elephants' problems in Thailand, based on the interviews and the researcher's observation, it was found that although the respondents were aware of the problems of the elephants in Thailand in general and the difficulties faced by ElephantsWorld specifically, the majority were not interested in learning more deeply about the root causes of these problems because they believed that these were beyond their responsibility and too complicated for them.

Next is active participation of local people. Data from the participant observation showed that The local people whom the volunteer tourists interacted with were the staff and mahouts working at ElephantsWorld. They have very little opportunity to meet and interact with other local residents in the province because ElephantsWorld is isolated, and a long way from the town centre, and the volunteer tourists stayed and worked there. Moreover, the volunteer tourism programme at ElephantsWorld was not designed to encourage involvement of local residents, apart from the staff and mahouts. Marginalising the local residents in the volunteer tourism experiences not only limited the opportunity for volunteer tourists to undertake cross-cultural exchange with local people, which could potentially heighten their intercultural understanding and global awareness, but also removed such an opportunity for local people. This study agrees with Brondo (2015) and Gray *et al.* (2017) that global citizenship should be extended to all actors in volunteer tourism.

The last barrier is the respondents' colonial view. The interviews showed that the belief that people from rich, developed countries were more privileged than people in poor, developing countries was common among the respondents. This perspective does not challenge the unequal relationship between volunteer tourists and the people in the destination country, but reinforces the inequality of the world, which is not the goal of critical global citizenship.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study support other studies which find that volunteer tourism experiences are multidimensional in nature (Wearing, 2001; Broad, 2003; Brown, 2005; Proyrungroj, 2017; Sin, 2009). Three main dimensions of the volunteer tourism experiences were identified in this study: (1) general wildlife experiences; (2) experiences related to self-development; and (3) experiences fostering a sense of global citizenship, but only in a soft form. Not all respondents in this study revealed that they had all of these three dimensions of experience, as some stated that they had only the general wildlife experiences and self-development experiences. Among the respondents who stated that they have all three dimensions of the experiences, only a few indicated that their experiences of general wildlife interactions or those related to self-development have aroused their sense of global citizenship.

As for the general wildlife experiences, this study echoes the findings of previous studies on wildlife tourism and international conservation volunteer tourism (Cong *et al.*, 2014; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; McIntosh & Wright, 2017; Rattan *et al.*, 2012; Taylor *et al.*, 2020) which argue that the opportunity to have proximate interactions with wildlife, characteristics and behaviours of wildlife and natural setting where experience was formed serve as significant factors, enabling tourists to have meaningful experiences. All of these factors were mentioned by the respondents in this study as intrinsic to the quality and richness of their volunteer tourism experiences at ElephantsWorld. In addition, these factors, especially the characteristics and behaviours of the elephants (i.e. size, strength, charm, discipline, and intelligence), were found to facilitate the respondent's deep emotional connection with the elephants, making them reverence and respect these animals. Moreover, such deep emotional connection was also found to play an important role in promoting a sense of global citizenship among volunteer tourists. This study reported that as a result of the emotional connection, some respondents became concerned about the problems of elephants in Thailand and in other countries, and intended to continue working for the well-being of elephants, such as initiating elephant protection activities, raising funds or returning to ElephantsWorld in the future.

In term of experiences related to self-development, the findings of this study also concur with previous studies on international volunteer tourism that this form of tourism is transformative learning in nature (Broad, 2003; Harlow & Pomfret, 2007; Lepp, 2009; Proyrungroj, 2017; Wearing, 2001) as it provides a

platform for the volunteer tourists to learn and develop themselves in a number of ways. This finding also echoes other studies (Gray *et al.*, 2017; Judge, 2017; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Smith, 2014; Vrasti, 2012; Wearing & McGehee, 2013) that international volunteer tourism not only involves doing good for others in a distant place, but also serves as a means for individuals to develop their social capital, acquire overseas experiences, and build competitiveness in their CV for their future study and/or career. In addition, this study agrees with other researchers (Baillie-Smith & Laurie, 2011; Jones, 2011; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Simpson, 2005; Sin *et al.*, 2015; Vrasti, 2012) that this notion represents a form of economic neoliberalism.

However, the findings of this study also reveal that international conservation volunteer tourism does not only create self-oriented, personal development experiences, which represent neoliberal modes of consumer citizenship, but also has an impact on the respondents' perspectives on or future action with elephants, which inspires a sense of global citizenship. Specifically, this study finds that knowledge of elephants, especially that related to difficulties faced by elephants in Thailand (i.e. dietary problems of aged elephants and using elephants for tourism purposes) inspires some respondents' concern for elephants' well-being. This finding supports the argument made by Wearing & Neil (2000) that volunteer tourism experiences and the nature features of the destination enable the volunteer tourists to place more emphasis on 'others'.

For the experiences in terms of global citizenship, the majority of the respondents indicated that their volunteering fostered a sense of global citizenship for them, supporting the advocates of international volunteer tourism (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014; Butcher, 2017; Butcher & Smith, 2010; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Lorimer, 2010; Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Roques *et al.*, 2018). The three main dimensions of global citizenship, as developed by Morais & Ogden (2010), including social responsibility, global competence, and global civic engagement, were found among the volunteer tourists. For social responsibility, volunteer tourism experiences enabled tourists to be aware of and concerned about the problems of elephants in Thailand. These tourists perceived that it was their responsibility, as members of rich, developed countries, to resolve these problems in Thailand. It can be seen that although the respondents showed their views in terms of social responsibility, they also hold a colonial view that they were more privileged in terms of having time and financial ability to travel, as well as privileged to choose where and how to help. This supports the scholars (e.g. Lyons *et al.*, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Simpson, 2004; 2005; Sin, 2009; 2010; Vrasti, 2012) who argue that volunteer tourism can potentially reinforce, rather than challenge, an unequal power dynamic between volunteer tourists and the host community. Such colonial views permitted the volunteer tourists to have only a sense of soft global citizenship.

As for global competence, volunteer tourists have learnt to adapt to work and live with people from different backgrounds and become more knowledgeable about elephants. They were also keen to share such knowledge with others. The volunteer tourism experiences also develop a sense of global civic engagement among volunteer tourists by inspiring them to engage more in the elephant protection activities, both in Thailand and other countries.

The experiences of the volunteer tourists in this study represent only the soft conception of global citizenship, as conceptualised by Andreotti (2006). This study echoes the findings of Cameron (2013) and Gray *et al.* (2017), who argue that soft global citizens usually conclude that problems in the Global South are the consequences of a lack of access to resources and fail to address the political and historical processes that lead to such problems. Similarly, in this study, the respondents viewed the problems of elephants and ElephantsWorld as mainly resulting from lack of resources such as budget and

manpower, and were not interested in the root causes of such problems. However, the findings of this study suggest one aspect of the respondents that contradicts the features of soft global citizens suggested by Andreotti (2006), which is a desire to learn from the others. According to Andreotti (2006), soft global citizens feel that it is their responsibility to 'teach' people in the Global South because they are from the Global North. In contrast, the respondents in this study realised that they have limited knowledge about the elephants' behaviours and how to take care of them and desired to learn about this from the staff and mahouts. This might represent a good sign for these volunteer tourists to become more critical global citizens if the managers of the volunteer tourism programme and the sending organisations pay more attention in encouraging the tourists to learn from and engage in genuine cross-cultural exchanges with local people.

In addition, the findings of this study are also aligned with the findings of Zeddies & Millet (2015), which argue that volunteer tourists seem to see the problems in the host community as passive attractions. In this study, the volunteer tourists viewed the problems of elephants in Thailand as passive, characteristic of poor, developing countries and failed to acknowledge the root causes of the problems. They also had a similar perspective about the limitations of ElephantsWorld in terms of budget and manpower shortage. They believed that their volunteering contribution was necessary, even though it could not eliminate these problems/limitations. This view also reflects the soft form of global citizenship.

The study also addresses the main obstacles limiting the volunteer tourists to become the critical global citizens, which include language barriers, short visits, intentions and willingness of the volunteer tourists to learn about the root causes of the problems, active participation of wider groups of local people, and the volunteer tourists' colonial perspective. These issues must be seriously addressed by host organisations and sending organisations.

This study provides new arguments on international volunteer tourism projects related to wildlife conservation. Firstly, it suggests that deep emotional connection between the volunteer tourists and the wildlife, and knowledge of problems concerning the wildlife, are important factors inspiring a sense of global citizenship among volunteer tourists. These factors have the power to encourage volunteer tourists to be more aware of the problems of elephants and encourage them to take action. Secondly, it argues that to foster more critical global citizenship among the volunteer tourists, the host organisations and sending organisations must encourage volunteer tourists to have 'genuine' cross-cultural exchange with and learn from local people. These practices will reduce the perception of inequality between the Global North volunteer tourist and Global South local residents, as these people will realise that they are not always superior or inferior to the other group. This argument supports Gray *et al.* (2017), who note that local residents should be treated as equal participants in knowledge production, and through this, a more critical, inclusive model of global citizenship can be achieved.

The findings of this study provide insights for host organisations, sending organisations and marketers on how volunteer tourists perceive their experiences of volunteering in an elephant protection project. Specifically, these stakeholders can gain an understanding of the aspects of volunteer tourism experiences that are valued by the volunteer tourists, the factors that can foster a sense of global citizenship among the volunteer tourists, especially those that have a potential to lead them to become more critical global citizens, and obstacles or barriers that limit the tourists to have a sense of critical global citizenship. All these insights can help these stakeholders to design and promote volunteer tourism programmes in a more ethical way that can truly promote critical global citizenship for volunteer tourists. The study specifically recommends that stakeholders pay more attention to facilitating emotional connection between the volunteer tourists and the wildlife, providing in-depth

knowledge on problems and their root causes concerning wildlife, and encouraging genuine cross-cultural exchange between volunteer tourists and wider groups of local people in the host community.

This research is not without limitations, which mainly arise from the nature of the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research approach adopted by this study, as the findings of this study were derived from a small number of respondents who were selected by non-probability sampling. In addition, the findings are also based on the researcher's interpretation and understanding of the data and her encounters with volunteer tourists. As a result, the findings are limited in terms of generalisation because they are unique to the group of informants of this study. This limitation is inevitable and common for studies that utilise this approach. As a qualitative study, this study does not seek to generalise the findings, but to gain rich and in-depth understanding of the issue being studied. Therefore, in order to ensure the rigour of this research, transferability was used as an alternative to generalisation. Thick description of the study's context and setting was provided to ensure that the findings are transferable to other situations that have a similar context to this study.

Finally, as this study examines this issue from only the volunteer tourists' perspective, representing the perspectives of only one player in volunteer tourism experiences, it suggests that to extend and enrich the knowledge on the association between international conservation volunteering experiences and global citizenship, future research should also study the perspectives of other players in volunteer tourism experiences. These could include staff members of the host organisations and sending organisations and other related local residents in the host community. Moreover, although, the findings indicated the main obstacles to achieve a sense of critical global citizenship, the study does not examine how to eliminate such obstacles. Thus, a study on this issue is suggested. Such study will provide an additional insight on how to use volunteer tourism as a means to promote critical global citizenship.

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