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ORPHANAGE TOURISM: Why its never okay to volunteer in orphanages in Ecuador or anywhere

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A groundbreaking study on [child-trafficking](#) within the “Orphanage Tourism” industry has just been published by Kathryn E van Doore, an Australian law scholar and the co-founder of [Forget Me Not](#), an international non-governmental organisation focused on child protection and the deinstitutionalisation of children in Nepal, Uganda and India. I’ve talked about the huge ethical problems of orphanage volunteer tourism on this blog before—primarily quoting and linking to articles written by [Daniela Papi](#) on the booming

ECUADORECOVOLUNTEER

[Ecuadorecovolunteer.org](#) first came online in 2007. It is one of Ecuador’s oldest and most trustworthy online directories for volunteers to connect with high quality volunteer programs in Ecuador’s [Andes mountains](#) and [Amazon rainforest](#) or on the Pacific [Coast & Galapagos islands](#).

This website does not make any money. Volunteers are encouraged to talk directly with the organisations doing the amazing grassroots conservation and community work on the ground in Ecuador. Jake the Aussie behind **Ecuador Eco Volunteer** can be contact via twitter:

twitter.com/chekhovdispatch

industry in Cambodia—but this new study centering on Nepal explores the grave human rights abuses against children that the global phenomenon of Orphanage voluntourism has created.

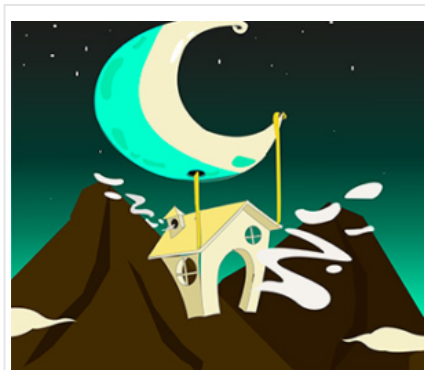
I've copied a complete summary of Kate van Doore's research at the bottom of this post, but her opening paragraph will make it clear to everyone who reads it why It's never okay to volunteer at an orphanage: *"There are an estimated eight million children residing in orphanages internationally[1] and four out of five children in these orphanages are not orphans. [2] It is well documented that many of these children are taken from their families by recruiters and sold into orphanages for the purpose of profit.[3] These children are known as 'paper orphans' and their plight is global."*

I say this as comments on this volunteer blog are often spammed from a Nepalese Orphanage—I'll call it spam because the comment seems to be designed to create backlinks to the Nepalese Volontourism website (which I wont link or name) with a copy and paste job beginning with: "Such a amazing post, volunteering is best way to convert your skills and help others... Volunteering thanks for sharing this lovely post." but the "such an amazing post" in question is not about volunteering, but about political instability in Ecuador during the lead up of the bitterly contested and disputed elections in Ecuador—it seems whoever is doing the digital marketing for this Nepalese Orphanage hadn't even read the post they found so amazing.



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WARNING:
Ethically Corrupt

As volunteers, there is a responsibility each and every one of us carry to not do more harm than good, otherwise, what the hell are we doing it for? A selfie for our friends back home? I started [Ecuador Eco Volunteer](#) with an Ecuadorian buddy back in 2007 when I was 23, almost 10 years ago, a time that I can admit to being much more trigger happy with a camera—now that I'm 32, I'm much wiser about the world as well as this voluntourism industry that turns over [173 billion dollars annually](#) and I'll state my thoughts about the nature of this beast accordingly. Having said that, there has never once been an orphanage listed on this site. Not once. Never will be.

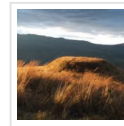
I've been very careful of what type of volunteer programs are listed here. The only programs where a volunteer may come into contact with children are in rural and indigenous familial communities, where a volunteer will often be working side by side with the entire family. There is also the [volunteer program in Quito ASONIC](#)—the Association of Parents Whose Children Have Cancer—which is directed by a psychologist, and friend, and was founded so that parents from the countryside can be with their children while they travel to the capital Quito to undergo chemotherapy—something that must be terrifying for the children, but made better because they are accompanied by their parents.

Orphanage tourism is never okay. Never. Kids should never be separated from their loved ones or institutionalized, and Kathryn E van Doore's research on child-trafficking within this industry is a stark wake up call:

There are an estimated eight million children residing in orphanages internationally[1] and four out of five children in these orphanages are not orphans.[2] It is well documented that many of these children are taken from their families by recruiters and sold into orphanages for the purpose of profit.[3] These children are known as 'paper orphans' and their plight is global. In 2003, Save the Children reported that 85% of

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children in orphanages in Uganda had identifiable and traceable family,[4] while in Ghana, the number of child care homes had significantly grown from 5 in the 1990's to over 110 in 2010[5] correlating with news reports that, 'running an orphanage in Ghana has become a business enterprise, a highly lucrative and profitable venture,' and that, 'children's welfare at these orphanages has become secondary to the profit motive.'[6] Orphanages have also been known to actively recruit for children. In Nepal, children are removed from their biological families under the guise of education, and placed in orphanages to attract orphanage volunteers and funding.[7] In Malawi, a comprehensive national survey of 104 institutions stated that 52% of the facilities were actively involved in recruiting.[8] While many orphanages in Cambodia have turned to orphanage tourism as a way to attract more donors with almost all centres funded by overseas donors.[9]

The profit in the orphanage business comes from volunteers and foreign funding. Volunteering in orphanages is a popular activity for people travelling to developing nations and as such orphanages are frequently established in locations that are popular with western travellers to make it easier to volunteer. [10] Volunteering with children in orphanages is often used to attract funds.[11] Some orphanages are established for the sole purpose of satisfying the western desire to volunteer. In these centres, children are portrayed as paper orphans in order to garner international funding.[12]

My research argues that the recruitment of children with biological families into orphanages for the purpose of orphanage tourism should be regarded as a form of child trafficking under international law. The reason that this has not been regarded as a form of child trafficking previously is because to meet the legal requirements of trafficking, the purpose of the act of recruitment must be exploitation. Exploitation is defined as, at a minimum, prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. Thus, the argument that recruiting a child into an orphanage is child trafficking has not been an easy fit, and has not been made legally until now.

I argue that the effects on children of orphanage tourism should be regarded as a form of exploitation. Whilst volunteering in an orphanage is usually regarded as an admirable activity, in fact it causes children a lot of harm. Children in orphanages are often trained to perform traditional dancing and forced to perform for visitors and volunteers. Some children are sent out to beg for funds in bars at night or hand out flyers advertising their orphanage.[13] Some orphanage operators have deliberately kept children malnourished to attract more sympathy and thus more money. [14] Even where orphanages are well run, over sixty years of research tells us that the very process of institutionalization is harmful to a child's development.[15]

Orphans and orphanages have become a business in some developing nations. My

argument is that like any business, the demand for the product, in this case, orphanage tourism, has driven the market. To satisfy the demand, children are taken from families with the promise of education or returning in the future, and manufactured or produced as paper orphans to reside in orphanages and solicit funding. The aim of my research is to illustrate that this unnecessary separation should be categorised as a form of trafficking, with the demand driver for such trafficking into orphanages being orphanage tourism.

Kathryn (Kate) van Doore is an international children's rights lawyer and an academic at Griffith Law School, Australia. Kate currently researches the intersections of child rights, institutionalisation and human trafficking. She is a co-founder of Forget Me Not, an international non-governmental organisation focused on child protection and the deinstitutionalisation of children in Nepal, Uganda and India.



About the Author

Ecuadorecovolunteer.org first came online in 2007. It is one of Ecuador's oldest and most reliable online directories for volunteer work in this country's beautiful Amazon rainforest, Andes mountains, or Galapagos Islands. <https://twitter.com/chekhovdispatch>

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