ECO

A Publication of Non-Governmental Environmental Organizations at the
XLII Consultative Meeting of the Antarctic Treaty

Prague – Mater Urbium

ECO is pleased to be in Prague, the mother of cities, for the XLII ATCM, the first to be hosted by the Czech Republic since achieving Consultative status in 2014. This marks another milestone in the progression of the Czech Republic towards full participation in Antarctica and the Antarctic Treaty System that began many decades ago, and coincides with the year of the sixtieth anniversary of the Antarctic Treaty. Congratulations!

CHANGING TIMES

There have been many changes in Antarctica and the Antarctic Treaty System since the Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1959. In the past few years, the pace of change seems to have accelerated, and yet more changes are anticipated for the near future. Human presence and its related footprint have continued to expand, with a number of new bases or other facilities such as runaways are being established, modernised or planned.

Aside from the more obvious research and associated logistics, tourism and fishing, activities related to bioprospecting in Antarctica are believed to be widespread. The climate crisis and the emerging biodiversity crisis are being felt in Antarctica too, with changes in ice, on land, and at sea, ocean warming and acidification, and changes in the distribution of species as well as the introduction of non-native species.

How have these challenges been addressed in Antarctic Treaty System bodies? Mainly through discussions, some of them long-drawn and inconclusive, coupled with occasional tangible action on some issues.

For instance, discussions on spatial protection and management are taking place across the Antarctic Treaty System, but these are becoming increasingly difficult, polarized and circular. The larger the area and the more ambitious the protection, the slower the progress. So there is progress on site specific guidelines, which are voluntary, but discussions about more systematic approaches to area protection, while ongoing, find obstacles at every step of the way (or rather: obstacles are found or created by some Parties at every step of the way – and do not get us going about MPA discussions in CCAMLR).

So, nearing the anniversary of the signature of the Antarctic Treaty later this year, we recommend that Antarctic Treaty bodies agree to take decisive action to continue to protect this region.

Being proactive on tourism growth

A new wave of tourism expansion seems about to break over the Antarctic. This has triggered some action among Antarctic Treaty states, including a very useful workshop organized by The Netherlands where many aspects of tourism were discussed. These add to endless tourism discussions, including an ATME or two, several workshops dedicated to various aspects of tourism, nearly 30 ICGs, hundreds of papers submitted to the ATCM, and many hours of discussion.

The outcome has been relatively paltry and discussions continue here in Prague. The issue is how to ensure that these discussions result in some form of concrete action to address emerging issues related to growing tourism, or simply dissolve into more discussions. There are important issues to address and these need to be tackled head on.

While there are continued sightings of the SV Red Herring that have some Parties very concerned, and reportedly even visits of the Flying Dutchman, and there are potentially serious problems with these pesky vessels – including a motorbike and a chicken – there are more serious issues to deal with concerning the growth and diversification of tourism at sea and on land too. There were about 56,000 tourists in the 2018/19 season,
including landing and non-landing passengers. Next season this number will raise to nearly 80,000 passengers, including landing and non-landing passengers. Many countries worldwide receive fewer visitors.

A new kind of polar tourist? Photo credit: Andrei Niemimäki (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The purpose of being proactive on tourism is not to make life difficult for tour operators – many of whom are trying to figure out how to handle growth – but rather to ensure that whatever it is that makes Antarctica awesome and interesting remains in place despite the projected expansion of this activity. This would be to the benefit of everyone involved – tour operators and their customers, scientists, and everybody who cares about Antarctica. More importantly, it would allow Antarctica to remain a comparatively wild, pristine place.

NEWS IN BRIEF
The 47th Annual Congress of Penguins, a gathering of the world’s penguin species, held on a beach somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere, issued a declaration confirming that they do not recognize arbitrary human boundaries between “land” and “ocean.” The declaration stated that “attempting to divide the governance of any particular area based on such boundaries is the mark of inferior species who can’t even go for a quick swim without freezing to death.” The Congress also issued a resolution confirming that krill is delicious.

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