Antarctic tourism: Using lessons learned to inform effective, proactive management
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Information paper submitted by ASOC

Summary

The anticipated growth in Antarctic tourism numbers requires the ATCM to take a more proactive approach to tourism management. ASOC has reviewed past tourism discussions and offers a number of lessons learned so that the ATCM’s decision-making can keep up with growth. We apply these lessons to the recommendations of the International Workshop on Antarctic Tourism (Rotterdam; 3-5 April 2019) and conclude that the following steps should be immediately undertaken: the ATCM should proactively identify areas of representative habitat/biodiversity in the Antarctic Peninsula where tourism is not a permitted activity; the ATCM should develop frameworks for the assessment of new activities; and the ATCM should enhance compliance by harmonising standards for assessing new activities and establishing precautionary guidelines for new sites.

Introduction

The International Workshop on Antarctic Tourism took place in Rotterdam from 3-5 April 2019. Given the prediction that by 2021/2022, there will be 60 tourist vessels operating in the Antarctic, an increase of 27 vessels over current levels, ASOC appreciated the opportunity to participate in this timely and necessary workshop.

To guide discussions, a document titled “Proactive Management of Antarctic Tourism: Time for a Fresh Approach” was prepared for the workshop. This excellent and very thorough document highlights that while ATCPs have invested much time in examining tourism at ATCMs, there have been few clear outcomes. It also briefly summarizes the wide range of topics that have been discussed, often repeatedly, without any forward progress. The upcoming growth in tourist numbers makes it clear that indeed this situation of inaction is untenable.

While IAATO has a strategy for dealing with anticipated growth, ensuring that tourism does not have more than a minor or transitory impact on the environment and other values recognised in the Protocol is ultimately the responsibility of ATCPs. There is now a short window of opportunity for the ATCM to proactively manage this growth. Although these issues have proven difficult to resolve in the past, ASOC hopes that the urgency of this situation will help ATCPs to commit to working constructively and in good faith to achieve actual outcomes.

In this paper, we will review some important lessons learned from previous tourism discussions, highlight some key aspects of the workshop, and make further suggestions for how the ATCM can act upon workshop recommendations.

Past ATCM discussions on tourism – lessons learned

Recently, ASOC conducted a detailed analysis of previous ATCM discussions on tourism and protected areas to better understand the history of these two important issues. Others have conducted similar reviews, including the authors of the workshop discussion document referenced above. Overall, ASOC concludes that many discussions of tourism-related issues have been circular and non-conclusive.

1Lead authors Claire Christian and Ricardo Roura, with contributions from Hannah Hayes and Rodolfo Werner.
3ATCM XLII IP26.
Over the years the issue of tourism has been discussed during two dedicated meetings of experts on tourism, at least two open workshops organized by IAATO, other workshops addressing specific aspects of tourism, a dedicated working group on tourism at the ATCM, and at least 373 documents on tourism submitted to the ATCM, including 142 WPs. We have chosen to highlight ICGs here as they are a very common way of attempting to have in-depth discussions and ostensibly enabling the ATCM to make progress on a tourism-related issue.

Below we provide some additional context and analysis to those earlier discussions to identify lessons learned and a practical and effective way forward.

**Lesson #1: Tourism ICGs have to date not been effective in enabling the ATCM to make progress on tourism management and need substantial revision or rethinking.**

The ATCM has engaged in 29 tourism-related ICGs since 2003, on topics ranging from adventure tourism, accreditation schemes, site guidelines, supervision of tourism, marathons, yachting and a strategic approach to tourism. Several intersessional periods have had multiple tourism-related ICGs.

Regardless of the scope, ICGs require a large time investment, and not all ATCPs have the capacity or willingness to participate. ICGs often provide a useful forum for elaborating upon views and working towards consensus, but they do not appear to be sufficiently effective to move towards consensus. Of the 27 ICGs since 2003/2004 not involving site guidelines discussions, only 5 have clearly led to the adoption of a resolution or decision. ASOC suggests that ATCPs be strategic in the future when choosing to establish tourism-related ICGs, focusing on relatively well-defined tasks, such as the development of guidelines or checklists, as these seem to be the most likely to produce results.

**Lesson #2: ATCPs have very different approaches to tourism and trying to develop a shared vision is likely not an effective way forward.**

In recent years, discussions on the overall approach or vision for tourism from the ATCM have not proved successful in building consensus among ATCPs. While all ATCPs recognise that tourism is a legitimate activity, most interpret that it has a lower priority or status than scientific research. However, some ATCPs prefer to regulate it strictly while others want to promote it or at least apply a *laissez faire* attitude. For instance, discussions on land-based tourism, which have occurred at several ATCMs since 2003, have revealed positions ranging from asserting a national right to develop permanent facilities for visitors to declaring that such facilities are incompatible with the Treaty System. These positions are clearly quite far apart. Likewise, discussions on a strategic approach or a shared vision have not led to the development of any substantive measure, decision, or resolution to guide future ATCM work.

ASOC concludes that in an ideal world, there would be a shared set of principles or parameters for what tourism should look like to inform future ATCM actions, but this has proven difficult to agree. Instead, it may be more productive to assume that future work will be guided by the existing objectives and principles of the Protocol.

It is notable that the recent workshop did not make any recommendations concerning further development of overarching principles or a vision to address its three key areas of tourism, namely growth, diversification and compliance, but rather focused on more practical steps. ASOC has also suggested in the past to use existing tools under the Protocol to regulate aspects of tourism.

**Lesson #3: The ATCM can make progress on tourism management by taking targeted, practical steps to address key issues.**

Limits on numbers of visitors are an effective and popular method of managing tourism around the world. Thus far the ATCM has preferred to rely on guidelines rather than hard limits, and IAATO has adhered to these guidelines (some of which were codified versions of IAATO’s own guidelines in the first place). Nevertheless, there is likely to be some maximum number of visitors that can be supported while still having

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4ASOC identified 4 Resolutions and 1 Decision adopted as a result of ICG discussions since the 2003/2004 intersessional period. No Measures were adopted as the result of an ICG during this period. We excluded site guidelines as they are fairly routine.

5Resolution 7 (2009) General Principles of Antarctic Tourism, as its name implies, is not included as it conveys only some fairly high-level ideas about tourism without having any implications for actual management.
only a minor or transitory impact. Determining this number and agreeing by consensus to set and enforce a limit could be very challenging for an international body.

The trajectory of Measure 15 (2009), the most significant outcome on tourism management in the past decade, is instructive in how to deal with a complicated and potentially politically sensitive issue. The work that led to this Measure was initially presented to the ATCM in 2006 as the result of on-site reviews of tourist visitation sites with site guidelines by Argentina, Australia, Norway, the UK, and the USA. This work concluded that no site could accommodate more than 500 passengers. Subsequently, the USA proposed a Measure in 2009 prohibiting landings from vessels with over 500 passengers, which the ATCM agreed. Although this Measure has not yet taken effect, it was an important step that allowed Parties to limit pressure on visited sites without having to resolve more contentious issues such as limiting overall numbers of visitors. Thus by a few ATCPs undertaking in-depth analysis and then developing a related proposal, an important result was achieved.

As another example of relatively fast and precautionary action, remotely piloted aircraft systems (RPAS) appeared as an item for discussion at the ATCM in 2014, with no prior warning. Suddenly it became apparent that by then RPAS use by scientists as well as tourists in Antarctica was ubiquitous, and consequently, RPAS impact and regulation became a significant agenda item for discussion at the ATCM. On the industry side, RPAS were initially tolerated but in 2015 IAATO agreed on a partial annual moratorium on the recreational use by tourists in coastal areas (not applying in the Antarctic interior) for the 2015-2016 season, a ban that is reviewed annually.

On the government side, several years of discussion resulted on Resolution 4 (2018) on Environmental Guidelines for operation of Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) in Antarctica. Although not mandatory, the guidelines represent the current environmental best practice for planning and undertaking RPAS activities in Antarctica and can inform decisions to be taken by competent authorities. Both the industry and Antarctic Treaty Parties were relatively quick to take action to prevent this technology – with potential effects on wildlife, wilderness and safety – from being adopted for tourism use until it was better understood. Therefore, inability to make progress on challenging issues should not prevent the ATCM from taking specific meaningful actions to reduce pressure on Antarctic visitor sites. Additionally, success in achieving consensus on specific actions in the short-term could assist in building towards long-term consensus on more contentious issues.

2019 Antarctic Tourism Workshop – assessment of recommendations

As referenced above, the 2019 workshop developed recommendations for actions at the ATCM and CEP under three key areas: projected tourist industry growth, continued diversification, and enhanced compliance.

In terms of growth, the CEP-related recommendations largely focus on areas of open-ended work, which are the design of additional site-specific guidelines, the development of an environmental monitoring programme, and to continue with the work on wilderness values and theoretical carrying capacity by SCAR.

ATCM-related recommendations focus on the approvals of Measures 4 (2004) and 15 (2009), the development of guidelines for the conduct of visitors ashore, and the establishment of administrative fees for tourism operators. Recommendations on diversification suggest the creation of frameworks for assessing new or concerning activities.

On enhanced compliance, the ATCM is recommended to take a number of steps, including establishing a subsidiary group for “enhanced engagement between Competent Authorities”. The workshop noted (but did not formally recommend) that the issue of land-based facilities also could be revisited by the ATCM.

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9Initially, the UK proposed a Resolution limiting landings from large vessels, which the US re-proposed in 2007, where it was adopted as Resolution 4 (2007).
10ASOC encourages Parties to approve Measure 15 (2009) as soon as possible so this critical regulation can take effect.
11IAATO 2015.
13ATCM XLII WP 19.
Based on the lessons learned above, many of these recommendations, though sensible, are unlikely to result in decision-making by the ATCM on the timescale necessary to respond proactively to tourism growth. For instance, environmental monitoring (although not necessarily focused on tourism) has been discussed repeatedly in the past in dedicated Antarctic Treaty Meetings of Experts (ATMEs), workshops, ICGs etc. with valuable conceptual results but mixed outcomes in terms of implementation.

**Next steps**

To enhance the likelihood that the workshop recommendations will result in proactive and effective ATCM management of tourism, ASOC recommends the following:

**To manage tourist growth: The ATCM should proactively identify and/or designate by the 2020 ATCM areas of representative habitat/biodiversity in the Antarctic Peninsula where tourism is not a permitted activity.**

The expansion in the number of visitation sites and the increased pressure on existing sites are risks to the Antarctic environment and to Antarctic species, even if tourism operations are conducted to high environmental standards (although poor standards would of course make growth far more problematic). This could be accomplished by intersessional work similar to that which led to Measure 15 (2009), and would have some natural overlap with the systematic conservation planning work being undertaken by IAATO and SCAR, and with the outcomes of the SCAR and CEP protected areas workshop and any monitoring programmes. Control areas such as these are necessary for understanding how tourism is or is not affecting the Antarctic environment, particularly in a rapidly warming area. These areas can also serve as insurance policies to protect conservation values.

**To manage diversification: The ATCM should develop frameworks for the assessment of new activities (as recommended by the tourism workshop) as these are relatively likely to result in defined outcomes, as demonstrated by similar efforts to develop guidelines for the assessment of ASPAs and ASMA or the impacts of RPAS in the past.**

These frameworks could focus on the potential impact factors of new activities on the values protected by the Protocol (for instance concerning noise, threats to wildlife and impact on wilderness), both with respect to case-by-case usage and also in the event of broad adoption. Tourism practices in other wilderness areas subject to tourism – such as parts of the High Arctic - may provide an insight into potential activity trends that may emerge in Antarctica and also examples of (un)successful management.

**To enhance compliance: A group of ATCPs should volunteer to review authorization processes and identify recommendations for harmonising standards, and the ATCM should take a precautionary approach to new sites.**

Since discussions on harmonised standards, improved communications, and implementation of rules have taken place for many years without much apparent progress, the ATCM should try to break up this stagnation. This is particularly important with respect to the approval of new activities, such as the “heli-skiing” mentioned in WP19 (submitted to this meeting). A WP from the U.S. and Canada on coastal camping that was submitted to this meeting is a good example of what this kind of work could look like.\(^{11}\) Such initiatives in the past have proven to be more successful when several ATCPs can commit to collaborative work in the intersessional period.

As an overarching recommendation, ground truthing the impact of tourism activities through on-board observers, site visitor reviews and inspections conducted under Antarctic Treaty instruments may be used to provide additional practical information for management (including for evaluation or planning purposes). The ATCM should also establish a precautionary approach to new sites, such as creating site guidelines for new sites that have not been formally assessed, or by limiting visitation to certain sites.

**Conclusion**

With significant increases in visitor numbers expected in a few short years, ASOC recommends that the ATCM look to its most successful initiatives to guide proactive management efforts. Tourism can often be difficult to discuss, but ATCPs will save effort in the long run if they take action. Decades from now, Antarctica can either be a model for other regions looking to preserve wilderness, or a cautionary tale. ATCPs have the tools to ensure the former outcome, but must escape the inertia of prior decades to avoid becoming the latter.