Key Elements of a Strategic Vision for Antarctic Tourism
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Summary
There is an urgent need for Antarctic Treaty Parties to develop a clear vision of tourism in the Antarctic, and to agree on a tourism strategy that delivers step by step on that vision through time. ASOC considers that the unending growth of Antarctic tourism is not desirable, required or inevitable. Antarctica is not a place for “mass tourism”. Antarctic environmental protection should begin at the departure region through the planning, EIA and permitting processes. The standard of the ships and on board operations are critical factors in ensuring a safe and environmentally responsible tourism. The highest standards of Antarctic shipping should be agreed and adopted, via legally binding instruments setting out standards and operations for all vessels operating in the Antarctic region. Tourism activities in Antarctica should demonstrably have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the environment. Antarctic tourism should primarily focus on characteristics of the Antarctic that are unique to the region. The establishment of geographic and seasonal limits for tourism activities at relevant scales (from regional to local, as appropriate) may be required. A precautionary approach should be used to manage tourism in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence about tourism impacts. Certain types of commercial tourism need to be discouraged or prohibited. In particular, the development of tourism infrastructure ashore should be prevented through a legally binding Measure or other instrument.

1. Introduction: The Context of Antarctic Tourism

Human activities in Antarctica are growing rapidly, spreading out spatially, and diversifying. Increased infrastructure development, larger-scale scientific logistics and the total number of people involved as scientists, tourists, guides and logistical personnel are leading to increased pressures on the environment, and cumulative impacts both at individual sites and in the Antarctic region as a whole. These developments are resulting in an encroachment of the Antarctic wilderness. Further pressure on the Antarctic environment comes from anthropogenic global climate change.

Commercial tourism constitutes a significant, and growing, part of the total human pressure on the Antarctic’s environment and its recognized values and uses. However, tourism does not necessarily provide the global public goods that can be argued for the globally significant science undertaken in the Antarctic. Tourism takes place in the context that science is a priority activity under current instruments. Tourism’s legitimacy is contingent on not conflicting with the scientific values and uses of the Antarctic; and while tourism is a peaceful activity, it should be managed so as not to become a cause of international discord.

Our comments on a strategic vision for Antarctic tourism are set in the strategic context of current pressures on the Antarctic environment and institutions. ASOC believes that the human footprint in Antarctica – with tourism as one of its components – should not expand or intensify, so as to protect the intrinsic values of Antarctica. There is a need to balance the quantity and quality of development in Antarctica. This paper focuses primarily on commercial tourism, as distinct from non-governmental activities of other kinds.

1 Lead author R. Roura.
4 ASOC thanks the United Kingdom for initiating a long overdue debate on developing a strategic vision for Antarctic Tourism over the next decade (XXXI ATCM, WP51). This paper is partly based on ASOC’s contribution to that debate, in which the lead authors were R. Roura, A. Hemmings, J. Barnes and S. Prior.
including non-commercial private expeditions. However, many standards applicable to commercial tourism are also applicable to those other activities.

2. A Whole Systems View of Antarctic Tourism

In order to develop a strategic vision for Antarctic tourism there needs to be an understanding as to what Antarctic tourism is and what should be the scope of such vision. Although ultimately what constitutes Antarctic tourism or who is an Antarctic tourist will likely be a matter of legal definitions adopted by the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting, in order to regulate effectively there has to be clarity as to what is to be regulated.

A range of Antarctic activities that could be regarded as tourism take place along three continuums: commercial – non-commercial; non-governmental/private – governmental; and mainstream – adventure. In practice, the bulk of tourism in Antarctica concerns the professional activity of regularly transporting paying customers to the Antarctic region in order to visit certain places and conduct a range of activities. These are the activities experiencing greatest growth and involving greatest numbers of people, ships, etc. Consequently, ASOC’s primary concern is commercial tourism defined in this way – not off-duty national programme people, private yachts, private expeditions or expeditions by environmental NGOs, whatever particular problems those activities may be seen to pose. The relative scale of the different activities says something about their likely significance.

In order to simplify the analysis, a whole systems approach will be used to describe Antarctic tourism, which involves five elements: tourists, tourist industries, generating regions, transit routes, and destination regions. These five elements combine to enable commercial tourism to occur in practice. This framework, as it applies to Antarctic tourism, can be described as follows:

1. In commercial tourism, the tourists are the paying customers of tour operators. Their activities consist, *inter alia*, of travelling to the Antarctic by ship or plane; enjoying a range of activities and entertainment on board; cruising around scenic areas on ships or inflatable boats; and landing at a range of sites to visit local attractions such as penguin rookeries or research stations, or to conduct activities such as extended walks, kayaking, or camping. There is, however, a broader spectrum of tourists engaged in less mainstream activities such as skiing, climbing expeditions, etc.

2. The generating regions can be anywhere in the world where Antarctic tourists or activities originate, where tour operators are based, or where vessels engaged in Antarctic tourism are flagged. These are not necessarily the same regions of the world. These various actors congregate at the so-called ‘gateway’ cities from where most Antarctic tourism cruises (or air expeditions) depart to the Antarctic.

3. The transport regions are located in between generating regions and Antarctic destinations. They encompass parts of the Southern Ocean south of 60°S as well as along well-travelled shipping coastal corridors such as the NW Antarctic Peninsula.

4. The destination regions can be anywhere in the Antarctic Treaty Area, although at present tourism tends to concentrate in the Antarctic Peninsula and the Ross Sea areas, with sporadic landings elsewhere on the continent and surrounding islands. Several land-based facilities serve as a staging point for tourism to parts of the Antarctic interior, to fly-sail operations, or as final destinations. There are of course spatial hierarchies: for instance, the Antarctica Peninsula can be regarded as a

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5 Based on Roura (in prep.).
7 Roura (in prep.).
10 See separate ASOC IP on land-based tourism submitted at this ATCM.
destination region, but within this region there are several specific areas where dozens of tourism destinations are clustered.

5. Individuals and companies involved professionally as organisers and operators of travel programs to the Antarctic constitute the commercial tourism industry. The industry is not monolithic and it could be described as a cluster of different tourism industries. These include ship operators, land-based operators, ship agents, travel agents, and travel companies. Most of these companies are members of the industry group IAATO (International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators), most of which are registered in Antarctic Treaty states. There are some tourism companies that are outside this association, some of which may have applied for membership to IAATO. If a National Antarctic Program or government agency acted as a tour operator it would be regarded as part of the tourism industry.

Looking at Antarctic tourism as a system helps to simplify conceptually what tourism means, even in the absence of an agreed definition of tourism. Each of these elements can be incorporated into an Antarctic tourism vision, so that the vision, in effect, outlines the ideal characteristics of these elements, individually, collectively, and in their interactions. The elements of whole tourism systems are affected by many factors in their environments, and conversely the process of tourism – when the various elements combine – has an impact upon the environment. For instance, tourism shipping may be affected by ice and weather conditions, and shipping accidents may cause fuel spillage. These are the type of interactions that need to be considered when developing a tourism vision so that, for instance, a strategic decision is made that only certain kinds of ship are allowed to venture into certain areas because of the risks involved and/or the particular sensitivity of those areas. This decision should then be legally enforced using the mechanisms under the Protocol and Antarctic Treaty to create legally binding obligations.

3. Key Elements of a Tourism Vision

The tourism system described above will be used to define some of the basic elements of ASOC’s tourism vision. It is not the intention here to produce a blueprint for Antarctic tourism. Rather, we focus on a few important principles with an emphasis on the desired outcomes rather than on the mechanisms required to reach specific outcomes, many of which have been discussed by ASOC elsewhere.

The tourists: numbers and activities

ASOC considers that the unending growth of Antarctic tourism is not desirable, required or inevitable. A clear statement is needed from the ATCM that this is the case. ASOC would prefer to see a conservative overall figure of tourists visiting Antarctica that is in the order of magnitude of present total numbers. The ATCM should be able to define more precisely what form of tourism may take place on land in Antarctica, and which forms of tourism are undesirable or forbidden.

Antarctica is not a place for “mass tourism”, if our objective is to ensure that the intrinsic values of Antarctica, including the region’s aesthetic and wilderness significance, are sustained through time. Plainly the term “mass tourism” would need to be defined as it is applied to the case of Antarctica, and this would be very different to that used elsewhere. However, some forms of tourism currently taking place in the Antarctic, involving large numbers of tourists, large non-specialist ships, short cruises focusing on a few frequently visited sites, a focus on onboard entertainment, and activity- rather than attraction-based tourism, suggest a trend towards mass Antarctic tourism that is quite distinct from, for instance, “traditional” Antarctic tourism as it took place up until the 1990s.

11 ASOC has produced a substantive body of work discussing specific aspects of tourism, tourism regulation, and tourism management. See for instance XXII ATCM/IP 121; XXIV ATCM/ IP40 and IP 54; XXV ATCM/IP 52, IP 76, and IP 82; XII SATCM/IP 10; XXVI ATCM/IP 44, IP 64, IP 67, IP 117, and IP 118-rev.1 (jointly with UNEP); XXVII ATCM/IP 93 and IP 108; XXVIII ATCM/IP 71, and IP 119 (jointly with UNEP); XXIX ATCM/IP 65 and IP 120; XXX ATCM/IP 79, IP 84, and IP 85; XXXI ATCM/IP 41, IP 57, and IP 58. See also ASOC (2004), ATME papers #20, #21, and #22.
**The tourism industry: high standards**

Antarctic tourism should be conducted in a safe and environmentally responsible way. This concept already applies in principle to all activities in Antarctica pursuant to Article 3 and other articles of the Protocol, but it should be spelled out precisely so that the standards are clear and to avoid it becoming an empty marketing statement.

The standard of the ships and on-board operations are critical factors in ensuring safe and environmentally responsible tourism. Tourism operations should aim for the highest quality in terms of best available practices for the various components of tourism operations - shipping standards, the conduct of landings, etc. - and an emphasis on Antarctic values, while maintaining the scale of the activity as a whole at a reasonable level that does not compromise the intrinsic values of Antarctica. In addition, certain types of commercial tourism need to be discouraged or prohibited. In particular, the development of tourism infrastructure ashore should be prevented, and ‘cross-pollination’ between private tourism operators and national Antarctic programs made fully transparent and regulated.\(^{12}\)

Although an accreditation scheme for tour operators may be useful to set the minimum standards for the tourism industry, this will likely be an industry initiative and thus the ATCM is unlikely to be able to determine its parameters. Accordingly, the ATCM should not base its own planning on any assumptions about such a scheme.

**Departure regions: early stages of environmental protection**

Antarctic tourism starts (and ends) outside the Antarctic region. Article 3 of the Protocol establishes that the protection “…of the Antarctic environment and dependant and associated ecosystems…” shall be “…fundamental considerations in the planning and conduct of all activities in the Antarctic Treaty Area.”

Antarctic environmental protection should begin at the departure regions, including at the planning stage, through the processing of EIAs and permits and, where appropriate, inspections at ports of departure.\(^{13}\)

There should be a greater consistency between Competent Authorities’ requirements prior to activities being undertaken in Antarctica, particularly in elation to shipping. The permit processes vary widely among ATCPs, and a consistency of approach and result would be much better.

**Transport regions: Shipping standards and overflight areas**

ASOC’s vision for Antarctic shipping is for the highest standards to be agreed and adopted, via legally binding instruments setting out standards and operations for all vessels operating in the Antarctic region, to protect the sensitive environment and avoid loss of human life.\(^{14}\) Cruise vessels should meet high and world’s-best ice-strengthening standards and classifications for the Southern Ocean,\(^{15}\) which need to be developed by the ATCM and the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Vessels above a certain capacity (from which derives a certain quantity and type of fuel on board) and/or carrying more than a specified number of persons should be prevented from operating within the Antarctic Treaty area. The limit can be determined based on a combination of environmental, safety, and other relevant criteria.\(^{16}\)

\(^{12}\) See also accompanying ASOC paper on land based tourism submitted to this ATCM.

\(^{13}\) See for instance ASOC (2003): *Port State Control: An Update on International Law Approaches to Regulate Vessels Engaged in Antarctic Non-Governmental Activities.* XXVI ATCM/IP 44.

\(^{14}\) See also ASOC information paper on shipping issues submitted to this ATCM.

\(^{15}\) “Southern Ocean” is here taken to correspond to IHO’s definition as the area south of 60° S, coincident with the Antarctic Treaty Area.

\(^{16}\) For this, it is worth noting that the sinking of the MV Explorer can be regarded as a best-case scenario with regard to the saving of human life, and, to a certain extent, with regard to the quantity and type of spilt fuel. On this bases cruise vessels should have a total capacity of hundreds, rather than thousands, of passengers, staff, and crew. This upper limit (i.e. several hundred people) could be refined further on the bases of other criteria including shipping standards, the management of sites where tourists are taken ashore, etc.
In addition, here is a need for some restrictions, improved routeing measures, information on routes and locations, and improved hydrographic information for the most utilised sites and routes.

The ATCM should set more specific parameters for tourism over-flights in Antarctica, including overflight areas and the desirable volume of such flights in each season.

**Destination regions: protecting the Antarctic environment**

The protection of the Antarctic environment is paramount. Tourism activities in Antarctica should have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the environment. This statement, which is one of IAATO’s stated principles, is a positive standard against which to measure tourism proposals prior to the activity, to evaluate the activity while it is being conducted, and to conduct environmental monitoring after the activity. One problem with the existing ‘regulatory’ set-up is that each operator’s voyages are considered in individual IEEs, which does not permit any review of cumulative impacts as a result of many activities closely clustered in time and/or concentrated in a particular area, or their implications through time.

In ASOC’s view, Antarctic tourism should primarily focus on characteristics of the Antarctic that are unique to the region, such as appreciation of its flora, fauna, landscapes, history, wilderness values, and scientific research – i.e. it should be grounded in a “compelling purposes” rationale comparable to that used for scientific activities. Therefore, Antarctic tourism should be primarily value-based rather than activity-based.

A precautionary approach should be used to manage tourism in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence about tourism impacts.

The establishment of geographic and seasonal limits for tourism activities at relevant scales (from regional to local, as appropriate) would be desirable. This means that the tourism destination region should not necessarily be almost the whole of the Antarctic at all times. However, site distribution and frequency of use should be evaluated from a regional rather than site-specific perspective. Tourism impacts would be felt at specific sites, but tourism operates regionally in a network of sites. The approaches used to manage one site, in terms of encouraging or discouraging tourism there, may have an influence on the conduct of tourism in other sites nearby. Thus, it would seem that the spatial scale of site protection (in a broad context) would more appropriately begin at a strategic level – creating a broader regional system rather than building from individual sites. For this reason we have suggested the use of ASMA approaches to manage relatively large areas. This would enable, *inter alia*, the control of the flow of tourism towards or away from certain sites; the opening up/closing off of some sites temporarily (i.e., for one, two or several seasons); and generally provide an aid to managing tourism within discrete regions.

At the other end of the visitation spectrum, attention needs to be turned to the development of new sites for the regular landings of organised tourist groups where there have been few visits up to the present. Such activities could compromise unknown future scientific values, as well as wilderness values, and should not be allowed to unfold without a clear plan in place and an analysis of the tradeoffs that may be involved.

**4. Closing Remarks**

Developing a tourism vision is not solely about managing specific sites or about regulating visitor behaviour. It is about making strategic decisions concerning the commercial tourism industry as it concerns the Antarctic region. In our view the ATCM should aim to develop a strategic vision addressing all the key

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17 Article II, Section E of IAATO’s bylaws states that “Members subscribe to the principle that their planned activities will have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment.” ASOC supports this principle while noting that, in practice, tourism may well have a more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment. It follows that some forms of tourism, individually or collectively, may ultimately require a CEE.


components of the tourism system that are relevant to the Antarctic and within area of the influence of the ATCM, including other fora which can work as partners to the ATCM.

Overall, developing a strategic vision on tourism requires setting up sensible spatial, temporal, and activity limits to the conduct of tourism, and promoting high environmental and safety standards. It also requires strategic decisions in terms of how commercial tourism will be regulated and managed. A tourism vision should be developed in the context that safeguarding international peace, ensuring freedom of scientific research, and protecting the environment constitute the three pillars of the Antarctic Treaty System.

As we have noted elsewhere, given the growing complexity of tourism there is not a single specific action that Antarctic Treaty Parties should take to address the problems raised by commercial tourism. Rather, there is a range of measures needed. First and foremost, there is an urgent need for Antarctic Treaty Parties to develop a clear vision of tourism in the Antarctic, and to agree on a tourism strategy that delivers step by step on that vision through time. We are encouraged that this debate is a first step towards addressing this urgent need, and we hope that it will stimulate Parties to take a proactive role in addressing

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22 ASOC (2008) op.cit.