Land-Based Tourism in Antarctica
Summary

This paper examines the interface between commercial land-based tourism and the use of national program infrastructure, as well as recent developments in land-based tourism. Eight Parties responded to a questionnaire distributed by ASOC at ATCMs XXXI and XXXII. None of the respondents reported providing any support to tourism other than free basic hospitality, and most respondents explicitly opposed the notion of Parties being involved in tourism operations. Based on these responses it is apparent that some Parties have identified two locations where commercial land-based tourism takes place using infrastructure from National Antarctic Programs. All land-based tourism operations rely directly or indirectly on some form of state support, including permits, use of runways, and use of facilities and terrain adjacent to research stations. The continued improvement of land-based facilities such as runways and camps, and the broad array of land activities now available to tourists, indicate that land-based tourism is growing. If no actions are taken soon, land-based tourism may well become consolidated as a major activity in a few years.

1. Overview

In 2008 ASOC submitted to XXXI ATCM IP 41, A decade of Antarctic tourism: Status, change, and actions needed. Among other issues relevant to Antarctic tourism, ASOC’s IP 41 discussed the interface between commercial land-based tourism and the activities of national Antarctic programs. The paper remarked on a disturbing lack of clarity with regard to aspects of land-based tourism – what an IAATO representative described aptly as “fogginess”.¹ ASOC’s IP 41 included a table listing several facilities used to support land-based tourism, some of which were private commercial facilities and other facilities of National Antarctic programs. Subsequently, Japan noted that it “would welcome IAATO and ASOC to come to ATCM XXXII with as much information as possible and an analysis of land-based facilities.”² Japan also requested all Parties “…to verify such information and to provide supplementary information.”³

Responding to this request, ASOC submitted IP 23 Tourism and land-based facilities in Antarctica at ATCM XXXII and IP 79 Tourism and land-based facilities in Antarctica: Analysis of a questionnaire distributed to Antarctic Treaty Parties at ATCM XXXIII (also previously submitted to the ATME on Antarctic Tourism in Wellington, New Zealand in December 2009).

Following from those earlier contributions, this paper discusses additional information obtained since the XXXIII ATCM, some in the form of new questionnaires obtained from Antarctic Treaty Parties, and some from other sources. This paper examines the interface between commercial land-based tourism and the use of national program infrastructure, as well as recent developments in land-based tourism. While not a comprehensive review, it is apparent that in the three years since beginning this research, new land-based facilities and land-based tourism modalities have emerged.

2. Land-based tourism and Antarctic Treaty Parties

Eight Parties responded to ASOC’s questionnaire between the XXXII ATCM and early 2011: Brazil, Ecuador, India, Germany, New Zealand, The Netherlands, South Africa, and Sweden. Although this is a relatively small number of Parties, the respondents were representative of all Antarctic Treaty Parties that run or use facilities in all parts of the Antarctic region. Most Parties provided an overview of their assessment; one Party in addition provided an overview of the situation as assessed from each of its stations.

None of the respondents reported providing any support to tourism other than free basic hospitality, and most respondents explicitly opposed the notion of Parties being involved in tourism operations. The responses generally suggest that the use of land-based facilities operated by Antarctic Treaty Parties for tourism purposes is not regarded as appropriate. Several states indicated strong opposition to the use of their facilities for land-based tourism. Two of the eight responses indicated that one or more National Antarctic Programs (other than the respondents) possibly transport and/or accommodate tourists. In a third response a Party

¹ This was a term used by D Landau at the IAATO conference in Miami, March 17-19, 2008.
² Final Report XXXI ATCM, paragraph 251.
³ Final Report XXXI ATCM, paragraph 251.
reported awareness of a land-based facility from another Party being used for tourism purposes in its area of operations.

Based on these responses it is apparent that some Parties have identified two locations where commercial land-based tourism takes place using infrastructure from National Antarctic Programs, which indicates a level of support from those programs: Fildes Peninsular (Teniente R. Marsh Airport) and the blue ice airstrip near Novolazarevskaya Station in Queen Maud Land (see also Japan, 2011). Tourism activity at the latter was discussed extensively in WP 61 Queen Maud Land – A new center of non-governmental activity in the Antarctic, submitted by the Russian Federation at ATCM XXXIII (Russian Federation, 2010). In this paper, Russia noted that it is dealing with the downstream effects of activities permitted by other Parties. The paper also expressed Russia’s discomfort with the increased demands placed on them by these tourist activities, and requested that other Parties coordinate the issuance of permits to non-governmental operators. The comments by Russia indicate that the use of national Antarctic infrastructure by tour operators has increased significantly in the past few years and likely requires further attention from Parties. At Fildes Peninsula, the airstrip is primarily used for landings by the Chilean company Aerovías DAP. At least during the 2005-2006 season this company was also making use of a Russian building at Bellingshausen Station, and a Uruguayan hangar at Artigas Base (Bastmeijer and Roura, 2008; ASOC, 2008), albeit this is not necessarily still the case. Chilean authorities have stated the hotel at Marsh Airstrip is currently used to accommodate tourists and that state-sponsored tourism at their stations would be unconstitutional and illegal.4

3. Land-based tourism infrastructure and activities

Infrastructure for land-based commercial tourist activities is in use in several parts of Antarctica. IAATO (2009) describes the land-based activities of IAATO members at the time; this document, while welcome, seems to be dated after only two years. A new tourism camp has been established nearby the Union Glacier. Activities on offer range from extended expeditions to one, three, eight and nine day trips.5 At the time of writing three land-based operators are listed as being IAATO members: Adventure Network International (ANI)/Antarctic Logistics and Expeditions (ALE), The Antarctic Company (TAC) and Associate B1 Member White Desert.6

The upcoming centennial celebrations of key historic events, most notably the Amundsen and Scott South Pole expeditions of 1910-1912, have also sparked an increase in land-based activity. The company Extreme World Races is sponsoring a 2011-2012 Centenary Race to the South Pole that will involve fifty participants and additional support staff, and last up to 45 days.7 The Northwest Passage Polar Explorers company is offering four centennial expeditions involving ski trips to the South Pole.8 The companies target individuals with different degrees of fitness and outdoor experience, from those at the high end of the spectrum to a more general public that is sufficiently fit to walk the last degree or two of latitude from a drop-off point to the South Pole. These are costly tours aimed at the high end of the market and costing ten or more times than a standard tourism cruise. IEEs are not yet available for most of these events.

One new camp of note is the one at Union Glacier, run by Antarctic Logistics and Expeditions LLC. This camp and runway replaces ALE’s Patriot Hills camp and runway. The camp can host up to 80 guests, and the airstrip will greatly facilitate land-based tourism by providing “more predictable flight schedule; less likelihood of delays to our programs.”9 To put this in context, 83% of Antarctic facilities have a peak capacity of under 80 people.10 A multi-year IEE for this facility has been approved by the US Environmental Protection Agency and is listed in the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat EIA database, although the IEE itself is

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4 Final Report XXXI ATCM, paragraph 215.
5 http://www.white-desert.com/
7 http://www.extremeworldraces.com/
8 http://www.extremeworldraces.com/
9 http://www.antarctic-logistics.com/news.html#1
10 Based on data available at https://www.comn/aq/facilities
not available in the database.\textsuperscript{11}

This facility will also be used to provide partial support for the proposed drilling of subglacial Lake Ellsworth (Lake Ellsworth Consortium 2011: 38). This appears to be another example of increasing “cross-pollination”\textsuperscript{12} between different actors, with some Antarctic operators acting as tour operators, and tour operators providing significant logistic support to National Antarctic Programs. Plainly a land-based facility operating for multiple years - which according to the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat’s EIA database is through 2014-2015 - that will enable the penetration of a relatively little visited part of Antarctica is bound to have a “more than minor or transitory” impact. Our concern is that in this case the ability to physically remove the station when its life cycle is over has been taken as evidence of it being a non-permanent facility, when in fact it will operate for several consecutive years or perhaps, as the Patriot Hills camp, decades.\textsuperscript{13}

4. Discussion

Involvement of national Antarctic Programs in Antarctic tourism and recent developments in land-based tourism, both individually and in their interface, are issues of concern regarding direct, indirect and cumulative environmental impacts, and impacts on wilderness values. They also raise questions about the role played by some National Antarctic Programs in these developments. All land-based tourism operations rely directly or indirectly on some form of state support, including receiving permits, use of runways, and use of facilities and terrain adjacent to research stations. Thus, although many Parties have expressed opposition to the use of their facilities to support land-based tourism beyond basic hospitality, ski treks and other activities would not be possible without their approval. The Russian paper on the Novolazarevskaya airbase exemplifies this contradiction by noting: “Some of these countries rendering in fact a real support for the non-governmental activity to their citizens and legal entities express officially within the ATCM framework a negative attitude to development of non-governmental activity in the Antarctic region.” (Russian Federation, 2010: 5). This situation has clearly resulted in logistical challenges for Russia and could result in challenges for other Parties in the future.

The debate on land-based tourism often derives on a discussion about the feasibility of developing Antarctic “hotels”, which are, in general terms, dismissed as an unrealistic proposition (although there is the precedent of at least one hotel constructed and operated in the Antarctic for some years). However, an absence of “hotels” does not mean that land-based tourism in Antarctica may not be further developed above its current levels. The continued improvement of land-based facilities such as runways and camps, and the broad array of land activities now available to tourists (from camping overnight and extended walks offered by traditional ship-borne tourism, to land-based trips of with a range of durations and levels of adventurous activities) indicate that land-based tourism is growing. Whether or not the facilities used to support these activities are “permanent” or not is a semantic debate; the fact remains that land based tourism takes places at some locations for extended periods of time. Nevertheless, there continues to be very little transparency about this form of tourism, with many of the IEEs for these new activities not posted in full on the ATS website. At ATCM XXXIII Parties acknowledged that “better reporting would facilitate further analysis and discussion of potential tourism impacts.”\textsuperscript{14} Information about these activities should be readily available on the ATS website and updated regularly. Without more complete and accurate information from Parties and the industry it will be impossible to make strategic decisions about how to ensure that these activities have only minimal environmental impacts.

\textsuperscript{11} The camp and associated infrastructure will reportedly be used to support the Lake Ellsworth drilling project. The CEE provided by the UK (Lake Ellsworth Consortium, 2011) indicates that this camp has a multi-year IEE that was approved by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

\textsuperscript{12} A term first used to describe observations at Fildes Peninsula in 2006: “Overall, it is apparent that the operations of national programs and tour operators at Fildes Peninsula are closely interwoven, with a degree of ‘cross-pollination’” Bastmeijer and Roura 2008, p198.

\textsuperscript{13} The CEEs for some of the research stations recently built by National Antarctic Programs outline a proposed life time for these stations – usually about 25 years – after which they may be removed. Plainly any of these facilities would normally be regarded as “permanent” in the context of Antarctica.

\textsuperscript{14} XXXII ATCM, paragraph 166.
5. **Concluding Remarks**

ASOC thanks the Parties that have responded to the questionnaire so far, and also Russia for its frank assessment of the situation near Novolazarevskaya Station. Japan’s recent inspection has provided further information about this particular case. However, there are still not clear answers to these questions:

- What is the extent of land-based tourism?
- What is the role of Antarctic Treaty Parties in enabling or supporting these activities?

Answering these questions is critical with respect to the basic functioning of the Antarctic Treaty System, now and in the future, including international cooperation, research, and environmental protection. ASOC has attempted to answer these questions by distributing a questionnaire among Parties (Appendix 1), and would welcome further responses. However, ultimately it is up to the Parties and the tourism industry – particularly IAATO – to provide and update periodically the information they have about land-based tourism.

Overall, it is apparent that discussions about land-based tourism go on under the pretence that this activity is minimal and only emerging, when in fact it seems to be fairly well established and is expanding. If no actions are taken soon then land-based tourism may well become consolidated as a major activity in a few years time.
6. References


ASOC’s questionnaire on the use of land-based facilities in Antarctica by tourists and/or tour operators (Rev. 1 – January 2010)

Institution name: 
Address: 
Officially represented by: 
Position 
Phone: 
E-mail: 

1. Use of land-base facilities

   a. Does your program have a policy for tourism use of your land-based facilities?

      Yes ☐  No ☐  Not yet ☐ 
      Please provide details in a separate sheet.

   b. Does your program encourage or support tourism use of your land-based facilities (other than allowing brief visits, purchases at gift shops, and use of postal services)?

      Yes ☐  No ☐ 
      Please provide details in a separate sheet.

2. Please list the use or uses by tourists and/or tour operators of land-based facilities operated by your program:

   - Basic hospitality (i.e. brief station visits) ☐
   - Gift shop ☐
   - Post office ☐
   - Bar/canteen services ☐
   - Overnight accommodation in buildings ☐
   - Camping ☐
   - Airstrip use ☐
   - Jetty use ☐
   - Tourism transfers e.g. fly-sail ☐
   - None ☐
   - Other (specify) ☐

   Please provide details in a separate sheet.

3. Are these uses provided to tourists and/or tour operators on commercial bases (excluding purchases at gift shops and use of postal services)?

   Yes ☐  No ☐  Other (specify) ☐

4. Are you aware of land-based facilities (not belonging to your program) that are used for tourism purposes in your area of operations?

   Yes ☐  No ☐  Possibly ☐

   Please provide details in a separate sheet.

5. Any other comment about this topic? Please include in a separate sheet.

Thank you in advance. Please send the questionnaire to: ASOC Secretariat, 1630 Connecticut Ave NW, Washington, DC 20009 USA; fax: 1-202-387-4023; claire.christian@asoc.org.