Eco-tourism 'major threat' to Antarctic

By Caroline Gammell

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The rising popularity of "eco-tourist" trips to the Antarctic, fuelled by the so-called "Saga Generation", could create an environmental disaster, it is claimed.

It is only a matter of time before a major disaster in the Antarctic causes a severe loss of life unless rules are tightened on shipping and tourism in the highly sensitive area, an environmental group says.

Incidents such as the sinking of the cruise ship Explorer last November, with 24 elderly Britons on board, could become common if nothing changes, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (Asoc) claims.

It says it was sheer luck that no one died when the 38-year-old ship hit an iceberg, punching a fist-sized hole through the hull.

In the past two years, six vessels have gone aground or drifted in the Antarctic, putting lives at risk and damaging the area.

The pressure group warns that as ships increase in size to meet the growing demands of tourism, the chances of an environmental disaster - such as a major oil spill - also rise.

The Antarctic has become increasingly popular, with the number of visitors growing from 5,000 in 1990 to more than 40,000 last year.

Asoc estimates that numbers are doubling every five years, partly because of the rise of the "Saga Generation" - wealthy pensioners who are spending their money on adventurous trips.

When it releases its report later today, Asoc will urge the UN's International Maritime Organisation to take "urgent and comprehensive" action to protect the vulnerable region. It will call for:

• Ice strengthening standards for all Antarctic vessels including all fishing and research ships as well as tourist and commercial ships.

• An immediate ban on the use and transportation of heavy grade fuels in the Southern Ocean.

• Further restriction on the release of untreated and treated sewage deposited into the Southern Ocean.

• The introduction of a vessel traffic monitoring system to track ships.

Sian Prior, from Asoc, said "collective responsibility" was needed on the part of all countries with a vested interest in the region.

"We fear that if nothing changes there will be a major disaster. We could see a very large oil spill or a large loss of life - or both."