



FIVE DECADES OF COOPERATION AND COMMITMENT TO SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION



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Antarctic Tourism – What Next?

Key Issues to Address with Binding Rules

Summary

This paper addresses three issues we have identified as requiring particular attention from regulatory entities: Antarctic tourism as a multi-scalar, dynamic issue; environmental pressures from tourism; and application of existing instruments. Current trends suggest that without regulatory constraints tourism will continue to expand and diversify, adopting new modalities and penetrating further into the Antarctic mainland and along its coasts. This may have consequences, inter alia, on the environment, the conduct of science, the safety of tourists, and other values of the Antarctic region recognized by the Antarctic Treaty and its Protocol. It is therefore important that Antarctic Treaty states take proactive steps to constrain tourism developments within ecologically sustainable limits appropriate for the Antarctic. This would require addressing tourism (and resulting environmental pressures) at the various scales discussed above. For this, making use of existing mechanisms would be a good first step.

1. Introduction

ASOC has been participating in the discussion about Antarctic tourism for well over a decade. During that time it has discussed a broad number of issues in Information Papers submitted to the ATCM, scholarly articles, and other contributions (see bibliography). In this paper we address three issues we have identified as requiring particular attention from regulatory entities: Antarctic tourism as a multi-scalar, dynamic issue, environmental pressures from tourism, and application of existing instruments.

2. *Antarctic Tourism as a Multi-scalar, Dynamic Issue*

Successfully addressing tourism requires recognition that it is a “multi-scalar” issue. By this it is meant that tourism requires analysis from different activity, spatial, and temporal scales:¹

- From an activity scale, tourism can be examined from the perspective of the individual tourist to that of groups of tourists; and the entire tourism industry (or industries).
- From a temporal scale, tourism covers from the short term (e.g. one landing, or a fraction of one landing) to long term (entire seasons to several seasons).
- From a spatial scale, tourism can cover from the local to regional (including departure, transit, and destination regions).

The effects of tourism can be direct, indirect and cumulative, and can relate to any of these scales and combinations in various ways.

Tourism is inherently a dynamic activity so that what takes place at these different scales is also frequently changing: the types of activities may change; the duration of the tourism season may increase; and the spatial distribution of tourism may also change. The characteristics of tour operators themselves are also changing – for instance from being relatively small owner-operated, specialized Antarctic companies to being subsidiaries of global companies. Furthermore, tourism is sometimes indirectly enabled, or actively supported, by national Antarctic programs.

It is important to map out tourism in all its scales in order for the Antarctic Treaty Parties to fulfill their basic duties. These include protecting the Antarctic environment and its dependent and associated ecosystems; ensuring the safety of persons travelling to Antarctica; and preventing conflict of interests between the conduct of tourism and other uses and users of the Antarctic.

With respect to activity scales, the focus tends to be more on what tourists do during landings – so that it has generally tended to focus on the small scale end of things: small scale, site-specific, short term. Hence the emphasis of the ATCM in recent years on site-specific guidelines as a primary tourism regulation mechanism.

¹ For a discussion of the spatial, temporal and activity scales of polar tourism, see Roura (2011).

As a consequence, lesser focus has been placed on what tour operators and the tourism industry as a whole are doing and planning to do; on longer-term trends; and on regional-scale processes, including not only frequently visited landing sites but their totality and the circulation networks connecting them.

ASOC contends that tourism has to be examined as a totality, both at the smaller end of the scale and also at the larger end of the scale. In addition, and in contrast to what has been done so far, the examination of tourism needs to be pro-active and strategic so that it anticipates further developments. While the tourism industry is very dynamic and influenced by a range of non-Antarctic factors, it is not so fast moving that regulators cannot identify and address emerging trends.

3. Tourism Trends and Environmental Pressures

Tourism is growing and diversifying rapidly, becoming established in new destination sites, using new modes of transportation, and resulting in increased traffic. Protecting the Antarctic environment means ensuring that tourism developments takes place according to clear rules. This section outlines some of the current trends influencing tourism, from which derive pressures on the natural environment (although also on e.g. historic sites and wilderness values).

3.1. Tourism industry trends

The overall trends of tourism are generally well documented. These include:

- Overall scale and rate of growth, with a raft of associated environmental pressures.
- Growing diversity, with increased growth of activity based tourism (e.g. diving, kayaking, extended walks) over attraction based (e.g. visits to penguin rookeries and historic sites). Activity based tourism involves very different potential impacts that that from traditional tourism. It often involves the use of equipment that expands the local area of activities with respect to attraction-based tourism.
- Emerging modalities, such as air supported, land supported, large capacity ships – all of which already exist and are becoming established in different degrees, and which are sometimes enabled through the use of infrastructure such as runaways, buildings, and removable shelters. Some these are dismantled periodically but established on site for the long term.

3.2. Destination development

Instruments should address the need to control the number of new sites that are used by tour operators, as well as the need to ensure that impacts are not concentrated too heavily on a few sites. Additional issues include:

- New landing sites.
- Increased pressure at existing sites.
- New staging sites from where activities penetrate into areas previously not used for tourism. In particular, more and new forms of land-based tourism, including the establishment of permanent camps, which enable the further penetration of the continent, and new tourism “products”, all conducive to the establishment of new sites, new transport routes, and new activities.

3.3. Shipping

Increased ship traffic could bring an increase in the negative environmental impacts associated with shipping, including:

- Noise pollution.
- Emissions.
- Chronic pollution.
- Increased number of tourism-related incidents.

3.4. Tourism impacts

Current research on this subject has to date covered a patchwork of issues, sites, and circumstances. The evidence indicates that tourism-related impacts are possible, and likely at some sites. However, tourism impacts are seldom discussed on their own, but always by comparing and contrasting them with the impacts of other activities, such as scientific research, or the broader context of climate change. This is useful to some extent – as it is important to minimize and manage the impact of all activities in Antarctica – but we contend it is important to identify, to the extent possible, the precise “footprint” of commercial tourism.

In this context, some Parties appear reluctant to apply precautionary action that would help to minimize tourism impacts, despite this being explicit in Recommendation 7 (2009),² and require instead scientific information prior to taking action. At the same time, overall Parties are not investing the resources in monitoring programs that are required to obtain that information, nor are they facilitating inspection of tourism activities.

4. Application of Existing Instruments

There are numerous possible mechanisms that could be applied to regulate Antarctic tourism. Antarctic Treaty Parties have approved several instruments related to various aspects of Antarctic tourism in the past twenty years, although only two of these are legally binding, and neither of them has yet become effective. Other tourism regulation is either generic (e.g. the Protocol) or non-binding self-regulation. In this paper we focus on a new or improved use of existing mechanisms. It is partly because these instruments have not been used to their full potential that tourism has developed as it has.

Existing mechanisms can be adapted to address tourism issues in a binding fashion. Current mechanisms can be strengthened to address gaps in IAATO's regulations – which plainly apply to IAATO members only, and are not legally binding. Some of the possible courses of action include:

- Improve EIA as applied to tourism, including changes in the type or intensity of activities, the establishment of new destinations (such as landing sites, tourism camps, and locations accessed from these); the long term use of particular sites; and changes in the type or intensity of activities.
- Increase the frequency and detail of inspections under Treaty/Protocol as they apply to tourism activities.
- Proactive use of protected areas so that tourism is managed in certain areas (ASMAs) that are larger than specific landing sites; and is excluded from some sensitive areas (ASPAs).
- Ensure that Measure 4 (2004) and Measure 15 (2009) become effective.
- Improve monitoring of tourism, including both monitoring the activity itself and the environmental impacts of this activity.

5. Closing Remarks

The type of specialized tourism in relatively low-capacity vessels (<200 passengers) with a focus on visiting Antarctic-specific tourism attractions that was in vogue up until the late 1990s seems to have been a reasonable model for Antarctic tourism, but is now replaced by a raft of new tourism modalities, including further penetration of the interior of Antarctica.

Unfolding Antarctic tourism could be regarded as opening a Pandora's box: once things are out – new modalities of tourism, new tour operators, new sites, etc. – it is very difficult to revert to the previous situation. This means that early action by Antarctic Treaty States will help to achieve appropriate controls so that tourism remains manageable and its development does not cause unjustified damage to the environment and science. Clear examples of lack of early action are the entry in the market of very large capacity, non-polar ships (previously constrained by IAATO to an upper limit of 400 passengers, now without upper limit); and unfolding developments with regard to land-based tourism, with a trickle of new sites being established in the past few years; and apparent involvement of some national Antarctic Programs that enable or support tourism, in the absence of a clear statement by Parties to collectively reject such involvement.

The main constraints on tourism are those placed by the market; by environment and climate; by technology; and by regulation. Current trends suggest that without regulatory constraints tourism will continue to expand and diversify, adopting new modalities and penetrating further into the Antarctic mainland and along its coasts. This may have consequences, inter alia, on the environment, the safety of tourists, the conduct of science, and other values of the Antarctic region recognized by of the Antarctic Treaty and its Protocol. It is therefore important that Antarctic Treaty states take proactive steps to contain tourism developments within ecologically sustainable limits. This emphasizes the need for Antarctic Treaty Parties to be pro active and strategic, and to develop instruments to regulate both generic and specific modalities of tourism. This would

² “In the absence of adequate information about potential impacts, decisions on tourism should be based on a pragmatic and precautionary approach, that also incorporates an evaluation of risks.”

require addressing tourism (and resulting environmental pressures) at the various scales discussed above. For this, making use of existing mechanisms would be a good first step.

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³ A more extensive listing of Antarctic (and polar) tourism literature is available from:
http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r27335/pages/eng/pub_aut.php?sujet=pub_aut#A