Guidance on Short Overnight Stays: Consistency and Coordination through Knowledge Sharing

Guidance on Short Overnight Stays

Information Paper submitted by the United States and Canada

Summary

We present the outcomes of a questionnaire regarding Short Overnight Stays (SOSs) that was circulated among National Competent Authorities (NCAs) that currently review the activity. Nearly all operators conducting SOSs abide by the IAATO guidelines for the activity. To date, the scope and environmental impacts of SOSs remain limited, but some anticipate an expansion of the activity. We suggest a virtual exchange of knowledge and best practices as a means to coordinate and reach consistency of approaches among NCAs reviewing and authorizing SOSs and other non-governmental activities.

Background

As summarized in ATCM XLII WP67 *Coastal Camping Coordination*, Treaty Parties, National Competent Authorities, and Observers have been considering the implications of coastal camping activities for nearly a decade. Over that same time, the terminology related to “camping” has evolved. Here we consider Short Overnight Stays, which refers to vessel-supported, overnight experiences offered by non-governmental operators. Visitors spend the night ashore, generally after the evening meal and before breakfast, accompanied by expedition staff. Short Overnight Stays have become more common in the past ten years and are included environmental impact assessments reviewed by NCAs.

Further discussion of SOSs was undertaken following ATCM XLII among the NCAs that currently review or authorize this activity. A questionnaire (Attachment A) was completed by Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States regarding the scope of SOS activities that they review, and their perspectives gained from the review process. The following section summarizes key results from the questionnaire and presents highlights from an analysis of the SOS data provided by IAATO.

State of Short Overnight Stays

To date, the six NCAs mentioned above regularly review SOS activities that are mainly proposed by IAATO members. The rare exceptions tend to be private luxury yachts with far fewer participants. Even in such cases of non-IAATO members, the expeditions are strongly encouraged to follow guidelines such as those provided by IAATO. The SOS guidelines include clear guidance on campsite selection; equipment, food, and waste; participant education and supervision; and other best practices.

In the recent past, NCAs have reviewed SOSs of around a dozen operators each year. This aligns with the IAATO data for the past ten years. While smaller camping groups, often non-IAATO yachts, have generally consisted of up to 15 people, SOSs conducted by operators with larger vessels usually involve about 25-60 participants and occasionally up to 85. Most operators have been consistent in their proposed numbers of participants year-to-year and, as of 2020, most NCAs have not received requests for larger groups.

IAATO’s SOS guidelines state that a minimum expedition staff to passenger ratio of 1:20 must be maintained. Most NCAs require that operators under their jurisdiction employ more conservative ratios during SOSs, ranging from 1:10 to 1:15. Passengers are briefed on the SOS activity before it commences, and experienced staff supervisors are readily available while on shore overnight.

Regarding camp site selection, NCAs responses were split between those that require operators to conduct SOSs from a list of predetermined sites identified in an EIA or permit and other NCAs that do not restrict operators to predetermined SOS sites. For the latter example, NCAs still expect the operators to abide by site selection guidelines (e.g., only on snow or bare rock, away from concentrations of wildlife). Most NCAs are not currently seeing an expansion of sites to different or novel locations, but some expect that this may occur in the near future. IAATO data indicate that while SOSs have occurred at twenty or more sites each year, for most of the past ten years, SOSs have mainly occurred at five sites, Leith Cove, Dorian Bay, Kerr Point, Georges Point, and Danco Island. Over the same time period, IAATO data indicate that the next most frequented SOS sites were Hovgaard Island, Neko Harbour, Portal Point, Brown Station, and Paradise Harbour. While 40-120 SOS visits occurred at each of the top four sites over the course of about 10 years, the latter five sites each had fewer than 30 SOS visits total for the same time period. The data indicate that numbers of SOS participants at each site followed the same pattern as the number of SOS visits.

Of the top ten sites SOS sites, there are currently Visitor Site Guidelines (VSG) for four of them: Georges Point, Danco Island, Neko Harbour, and Portal Point. The VSGs for Georges Point, Danco Island, and Portal Point do not include any specific mention of overnight stays, while the Neko Harbour VSG mentions “organized overnight stays” as an exception to the established wildlife resting period. While the majority of the 42 sites in Antarctica with VSGs remain silent on the topic of overnight stays, there are six others in addition to Neko Harbour that mention SOSs in the context of being the exception to the wildlife resting period. Fifteen sites with SVGs have established wildlife resting periods without exceptions and make no specific mention of overnight stays. The NCAs surveyed do not generally allow SOSs to occur at the sites where there are wildlife resting periods.

Further, the six NCAs shared their perspectives on the topic of including specific guidance on SOSs in all VSGs. Most agreed that mentioning SOSs in all VSGs may inadvertently encourage expansion of the activity and thus many expressed hesitation or concern about consistent inclusion of SOS guidance in all VSGs. Some NCAs suggested a more case-by-case approach, similar to what is observed in the current set of VSGs, taking into consideration the values to be protected at each site, especially the presence of wildlife. One NCA suggested that it may be prudent to develop site guidelines for certain sites that are most frequently used for SOSs, if they do not already have VSGs in place.

Consistency through Sharing Knowledge and Best Practices

The outcomes of the discussions regarding “coastal camping” at ATCM XLII included expressions of interest in the development of guidelines for SOSs to help ensure consistency of approach among NCAs reviewing and authorizing the activity. As a result of the intersessional discussions including the questionnaire, we suggest that it may be unnecessary at this time to develop formal guidelines for SOSs and offer an alternative route to reach the same desired consistency – the sharing of knowledge and experience.

Establishing a virtual information exchange regarding visitor activities such as SOSs would provide an opportunity for engagement and coordination amongst NCAs already reviewing a visitor activity and become a resource for new and prospective practitioners seeking information as they review activities proposed by operators under their jurisdiction.

We envision that the existing online forums could be modified to allow for activity-focused sharing of knowledge and best practices. The basis of the exchange could be a questionnaire, similar to the one used for SOSs, completed by experienced NCAs. Those with experience considering specific activities could also share examples or case studies, or simply direct interested parties to EIAs in the online database that contain a given activity. IAATO may wish to share guidance that they developed for their members. The information on best practices would be available to Parties and NCAs for consideration or incorporation during the review and approval of EIAs, permits, and authorizations. This could be of particular benefit to Parties/NCAs with limited resources and considerable workloads.

This organic approach to the development of consistent practices among NCAs would differ from an Intersessional Contact Group (ICG) in that ICGs are usually driven by the terms of reference toward a specific deliverable.

While the sharing of knowledge and practice would serve as an alternative route to the desired consistency of approach and practice for a given visitor activity, it would not preclude the development of more formal

activity guidelines at a future time point, if a strong need becomes apparent during the course of information exchanges.

Conclusion

While several NCAs review proposed SOSs through the EIAs from a number of operators, the scope and impacts of this activity are still quite limited. As such, it seems unnecessary to develop formal guidelines for SOSs at this time. We suggest an alternative means to reach consistency of practice and guidance regarding visitor activities, starting with SOSs – the sharing and exchange of knowledge and best practices through an online forum, similar in concept to a community of practice1. The information would be available to NCAs considering SOSs or other visitor activities during the review and approval of compliance documents.

The results of intersessional discussions and questionnaire completed by NCAs currently reviewing SOSs indicate that it may also be beneficial to:

* Revisit discussions that led to exceptions for overnight stays at sites in which the VSGs indicate resting periods for wildlife and consider whether additional guidance regarding overnight stays at such sites would help to ensure wildlife protection.
* Consider developing VSGs for any of the sites most frequently used for SOSs that do not currently have established guidelines.