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Summary

Antarctic Specially Managed Areas (ASMAs), are designated for improving coordination of activities, enhance collaboration among Parties and stakeholders and minimise potential negative environmental impacts that could be caused by human use. As seen in Deception and Admiralty Bay, ASMAs could include tourist sites which could benefit from coordinated efforts and management. Barrientos (Aitcho) Island is among the 15 most visited sites in the Antarctic Peninsula Region. Since 2010, Ecuador has been conducting research and tourism monitoring activities in this island. These activities have been possible due to the proximity of the Ecuadorian research station “Pedro Vicente Maldonado” to Barrientos and the continued interest of the country in this site. Results of monitoring activities developed with Spain, have allowed the implementation of management measures and the presentation of IP and WP to the ATCM. Grounded on a science-based approach, Ecuador wants to explore the possibilities for designating Barrientos as an ASMA area. Ecuador is confident that this designation will benefit coordinated research activities, the implementation of long-term monitoring programs and will enhance collaboration among Parties.

Background

According to article IV of the Annex V of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, Antarctic Specially Managed Areas (ASMAs), could be designated in areas where activities are or could be conducted with the aims “to assist in the planning and coordination of activities, avoid possible conflicts, improve cooperation between Parties or minimise environmental impacts”. Management plans, constitute the tool that contributes to their management by providing, among others, specific guidance on human activities.

Deception Island (M3, 2005) and Admiralty Bay, King George Island (M2, 2006) are examples of ASMA areas that have been managed through the collaboration and assistance of different Parties. These ASMAs have been declared because of their outstanding environmental, historical, scientific, and aesthetic values. Moreover, both ASMAs include areas of intense tourist use, that have benefited from coordinated efforts and clear guidance that have been established in their management plans. Barrientos (Aitcho) Island is among the 15 most visited sites in the Antarctic Peninsula Region. Its location, access, and the possibilities for developing different tourist activities have contributed to its popularity. Complementary, the island constitutes an interesting site for conducting research activities, including experimental designs, census, and inventories.

Since 2010, Ecuador has been conducting research and tourism monitoring activities in this island. These activities have been possible due to the proximity of the Ecuadorian research station “Pedro Vicente Maldonado” to Barrientos and the continued interest of the country for supporting research and management actions. Research has included biodiversity assessments, vegetation inventories, soil sampling, and experimental designs to assess the influence of human activities in wildlife species. Drone and satellite image analyses have also been completed producing high quality resolution maps and images of this area.

Results of research activities have contributed to complete ecological characterization of the island (Cajiao et al., 2020) and the generation of science-based management proposals (Cajiao et al., 2022). On the other hand, because of tourism monitoring, Ecuador and Spain have presented two IP and four WP to the ATCM recommending management measures for the island with the aims to avoid long-term impacts due to human use. Therefore, during ATCM XXXIV, Ecuador submitted IP 0126, Manejo turístico para la isla Barrientos (Buenos Aires), expressing its interest in “undertaking tourism monitoring activities on Barrientos Island during the Antarctic summer season”. Two years later, at ATCM XXXV Ecuador and Spain submitted WP059, Revised Visited Site Guidelines: Aitcho Islands (Hobart), in which both Parties recommended “the replacement of the designated route crossing Closed Area B, in order to favour the recovery of the vegetation cover close to the track, and as a precautionary measure”. During ATCM XXXVI Ecuador and Spain presented WP055, Recovery of moss communities on the tracks of Barrientos Island and tourism management proposal (Brussels), recommending that for the reopening of paths the “implementation of measures will be important to allow for adequate guidance of groups”.

At ATCM XXXIX Ecuador and Spain presented WP045, Assessment of moss communities nearby the tracks of Aitcho Island (Santiago), and during ATCM XLI both Parties presented IP054, Recovery status of moss communities near the trails of Barrientos Island (Aitcho Islands) (Buenos Aires), recommending to “continue the long-term follow-up of the recolonisation process, attempting to identify possible changes in morphology and flora that may occur in plant communities”

The research results and policy papers developed demonstrate the importance of collaboration among Parties and the need of long-term monitoring if the aim is to contribute to conservation and management. Considering the purpose of an ASMA designation and the importance of tourism activities in Barrientos, Ecuador is keen to explore the possibilities for the designation of Barrientos Island as an ASMA. This designation will benefit coordinated research activities, the implementation of long-term monitoring programs and will enhance collaboration among Parties.

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