IAATO Operational Procedures for responsible wildlife watching – An update

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Summary

This paper provides information from IAATO about recent updates to its operational procedures for responsible wildlife watching in Antarctica. These are reviewed routinely by relevant committees and working groups within the Association, in consultation with outside experts as required. Overall, the procedures were strengthened by emphasizing the importance of monitoring behavior for disturbance, no matter the distance from wildlife, and take account of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). The guide to passenger ratio for visiting emperor penguin colonies has been reduced from 1:20 to 1:15. A document has been created for IAATO Operators outlining overarching obligations for responsible wildlife watching, derived from ATCM and IAATO requirements.

Background

IAATO’s suite of operational procedures for responsible wildlife watching are integral tools for enabling the association to further its mission to promote the practice of safe, environmentally responsible private sector travel to Antarctica. IAATO supports the view that any well-managed wildlife watching experience avoids disturbance and harmful impacts while creating an enriching learning opportunity for visitors. Since its inception in 1991, IAATO has used its own and ATCM adopted guidance to support effective visitor management and implementation of the Environment Protocol, first presenting its “*Guidelines of conduct for Antarctica visitors*” to the ATCM in 1992 (ATCM XVII IP065 *Tourism in Antarctica guidelines for a low-impact presence* and IP076 *Responsible tourism in Antarctica).* In 1994, at ATCM XVIII-1 in Kyoto, IAATO’s “Visitor Guidelines” and “Tour Operator Guidelines” were codified by the Parties into Recommendation XVIII-1. These guidelines, among others that were used at the time, including Oceanites’ guidelines, provided expedition leaders and ship’s command with standard operating procedures for viewing wildlife.

Standard operating procedures, guidelines and decisions by IAATO, ATCM, SCAR, COMNAP and other relevant bodies are housed in IAATO’s Field Operations Manual (FOM) which is updated regularly and available to National Competent Authorities (ATCM XLII IP144 *IAATO Field Operations Manual (FOM*)). The FOM is essential in ensuring member Operators and their field staff know their obligations for conducting safe, environmentally responsible activities in Antarctica and have reference to the appropriate documentation to assist in having no more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment. IAATO also makes an abridged version of the FOM publicly available for download through its App, *IAATO Polar Guide: Antarctica* *(ATCM XLII IP 098 Education and Outreach by IAATO – an update for 2019)*.

IAATO regularly reviews procedural documents in the FOM and considers whether new ones need to be created. This process involves the association’s thematic committees and working groups, in consultation with outside experts as required. IAATO reports new procedures and guidelines to the ATCM and CEP, as appropriate (e.g., ATCM XXXIX-CEP XIX IP 121 *IAATO Wildlife Watching Guidelines for Emperor penguins and leopard seals*; and ATCM XXIX – CEP IX IP39 *Antarctic Whales and Antarctic Tourism*).

IAATO hopes this would be helpful to provide an update to ATCM XLV – CEP XXV on the latest industry led improvements to its procedures related to responsible wildlife viewing is useful.

IAATO Review in 2022

The following procedures were reviewed, updated and formally adopted at IAATO’s Annual Meeting in Hamburg, Germany, 24-27 April, 2023:

IAATO Operational Procedures for Wildlife Watching (Attachment A)

IAATO Operational Procedures for Viewing Birds (Attachment B)

IAATO Operational Procedures for Viewing Seals (Attachment C)

IAATO Operational Procedures for Visiting Emperor Penguin Colonies (Attachment D)

IAATO Operational Procedures for Watching Whales (Attachment E)

IAATO Procedures Upon the Discovery of a High or Unusual Mortality Event (Attachment F)

IAATO additionally created a short reference guide for member Operators that outlines their overarching obligations for responsible wildlife watching, derived from ATCM and IAATO requirements. This was also adopted at IAATO’s 2023 Annual Meeting in Hamburg:

IAATO Overarching Principles for Wildlife Watching (Attachment G).

A note on Avian Influenza

In 2022, several IAATO procedures that support responsible watching wildlife were identified for updating, further prioritized due to concerns about the global Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) pandemic. Advice from SCAR about the risks of HPAI have been added to relevant documents. Note that IAATO implemented specific HPAI biosecurity procedures ahead of the 2022-2023 season to mitigate the introduction of HPAI from direct human activities (ATCM XLV – CEP XXV IP101 *Heightened Risk of Avian Influenza in the Antarctic Treaty Area*). These were in addition to IAATO’s standard decontamination procedures.

In 2016, IAATO presented its new procedures upon the discovery of a high mortality event to the ATCM (ATCM XXXIX IP119). These procedures were updated in 2022, following consultation with the SCAR Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group and guidance from the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH). The updated procedures include references to finding an ‘unusual’ as well as ‘high’ mortality event.

Monitoring behaviour – a holistic approach

Additionally, following discussions with Operators, field staff, and feedback from National Competent Authorities, IAATO has further strengthened relevant procedures by emphasizing the importance of monitoring for changes in animal behavior no matter the distance from wildlife. This is to reinforce the understanding that while minimum recommended distances from wildlife are provided, they assume that wildlife is showing no signs of disturbance from the presence of recreational visitors or related activities (e.g. vessels, fixed or rotary wing aircraft and vehicles).

Further, the IAATO Emperor Penguin Working Group (EPWG) recommended that while Operators typically manage groups smaller than 20 visitors in the field, they felt it would be more appropriate to reduce the guide to visitor ratio from 1:20 (Measure 15 (2009)) to 1:15 when visiting emperor penguin colonies. IAATO will continue to review the effective application of guide to visitor ratios in other visitor management situations.

The EPWG utilized the CEP Draft Specially Protected Action Plan for the Emperor Penguin (ATCM XLIV-CEP XXIV WP034 *Report of the CEP Intersessional Contact Group established to develop a Specially Protected Species Action Plan for the emperor penguin)* during the review of IAATO Procedures for Visiting Emperor Penguin Colonies and requested it is made available to member Operators.