Slow Antarctic Tourism

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Information Paper submitted by ASOC

***Summary***

This document introduces the concept of “slow tourism” and discusses how it could be applied to Antarctica. Antarctic tourism needs to slow down to remain viable in the longer term, and that this can be achieved without adversely impacting the tourism industry. We do not attempt to fully conceptualize Antarctic slow tourism or its practical implementation, but rather to explore potential ways forward that resonate with current policy discussions around new paradigms and a comprehensive framework for Antarctic tourism. Important elements of this framework for ATCPs to consider would include:

* Encouraging low impact modalities of tourism – slow tourism being (only) one of them;
* Ensuring consistent assessment of tourism activities;
* Developing dedicated programs for monitoring of tourism impacts;
* Expanding area protection under Annex V; and
* Evaluating the effectiveness of existing tourism regulation.

***Introduction***

At ATCM XLIV in May 2022 ASOC suggested slow tourism as a potential lower impact modality of Antarctic tourism,[[1]](#footnote-1) and an adjunct to existing ASOC proposals for managing the impacts of Antarctic tourism.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Slow tourism “accentuates sustainable tourism practices as well as tourism at a reduced pace”, and is a potential alternative to the fast-pace of living that is seen as the norm, including in travel and leisure.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this document we discuss slow tourism as it could be applied to tourism in Antarctica.[[4]](#footnote-4) We also suggest a working definition of slow tourism.

ASOC suggests that exploring the notion of Antarctic slow tourism presents an opportunity to rethink how tourism is conducted in Antarctica, and offers a flexible framework within which to reconceptualize the tourist experience with respect to collective ecological impacts, travelling in tune with natural rhythms, and forging a deeper connection with place and human history in Antarctica. This, in turn, may contribute to the industry’s stated aspiration of creating lifelong Antarctic ambassadors,[[5]](#footnote-5) and may also support the Parties’ desire to emphasize forms of tourism that contribute to the enrichment and education of visitors.[[6]](#footnote-6)

***What is slow tourism?***

Slow tourism is part of a global ‘slow’ movement, which began with the development of ‘slow food’ in 1986, and has expanded to include Cittaslow (slow cities), slow tourism and other ‘slow’ activities.

There is no single definition of slow tourism in the academic literature.[[7]](#footnote-7) Broadly, “slowness in tourism appears as an alternative to fast, massified tourism and highlights a sense of responsibility towards the environment combined with a search for a meaningful experience for tourists”.[[8]](#footnote-8) From this anti-definition some core principles emerge such as “taking time”, “being in tune with a sense of place” and seeking quality of experience over quantity, creating an enriched, authentic experience of place through “not just sightseeing, but rather by using all five senses”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Slow tourism involves a personal choice as well, in that tourists already have an ethical commitment built into their travels.[[10]](#footnote-10) In response to the zeitgeist of tourism growth and diversification – globally as well as in Antarctica – slow tourism connects to a larger paradigm of tourism that includes degrowth and deceleration, and is an alternative to mass tourism and overtourism.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We propose this working definition: “Antarctic slow tourism is a form of tourism that facilitates a personal connection and lasting attachment to Antarctica through intentionally slower paced activities, within a framework that places Antarctic environmental protection at its core.” Exactly how Antarctic slow tourism could look in practice is an open question, and we have collated some preliminary suggestions in the section below as a starting point for further discussion.

***The case for Antarctic slow tourism***

Under the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty environmental protection shall be a “fundamental consideration” in the planning and conducting of human activities, and ecological sustainability should be a priority of tourism management.

While a range of environmental protections have been put in place by both Antarctic Treaty Parties and the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) to minimize the impact of tourism operations, it is unclear whether these measures are sufficient to protect Antarctic ecosystems at a time of significant change driven by a warming climate and rapidly growing human presence including, but not limited to tourism. This is particularly the case for the Antarctic Peninsula.

In recent decades Antarctic tourism has grown in response to market demand, with a diversification of adventure and other activities offered both on site and on board.[[12]](#footnote-12) Means of travel to and within Antarctica are also diversifying. In some locations semi-permanent camps support a range of land-based tourism activities, accessed by air or overland travel. Some cruise vessels offer tours in submersible crafts, or helicopter transfers to emperor penguin colonies. This trend towards diversification is likely to continue.

The expectations of tourists visiting Antarctica can be high, many of them having anticipated their visit for many years or, in some cases, decades. Some expect to see and do in a short Antarctic trip more than others would in years of Antarctic service (e.g. scientists or ship’s crew). Unrealistic demands can result in overambitious itineraries and frantic schedules, with a cascading range of potential impacts including passenger experience and operational safety.

***Implementing slow tourism in Antarctica***

Many aspects of Antarctic tourism today are fixed and largely unchangeable, even in the context of climate change: the location of Antarctica as a destination; points of departure to Antarctica; the availability of sites that enable safe and rewarding visitation by groups of tourists; time available to travel to, from and within Antarctica; the duration of seasons, days and nights. Despite these conditioning factors, new travel patterns, tourism experiences and behaviours more in tune with natural rhythms may be possible, resulting in a deeper experience of place.

Under “slow tourism”, many activities would be maintained but “slowed down” and simplified. There would be fewer but potentially longer landings, allowing a deeper experience of places and reducing local transport, resulting in less marine noise and a lower likelihood of collisions with whales, among other benefits. ASOC understands that some shipborne tour operators have already considered or adopted a “one landing per day” policy.

Hybrid activities could also be developed. For instance, at least one operator of shipborne tourism has tested the use of so-called “base camps” in which a ship remains in a certain area for some days and serves as a hub for the conduct of activities on board, at sea or onshore. The focus of the trip is the activities, which are not subject to additional charges, rather than cruising around and conducting landings (although those activities are carried out as well).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Additional activities could also be offered to enhance connection with Antarctica, including educational, artistic and citizen science activities. Emphasis could be placed on the appreciation of sensory aspects of Antarctica that are not site-specific, such as cold, light or silence. These could be “rediscovered” through activities such as guided cold water immersions, photography classes, painting sessions, and silent landings.

***Closing remarks***

We suggest that Antarctic tourism needs to slow down to remain viable in the longer term, and that this can be achieved without adversely impacting the tourism industry.

We have made some preliminary suggestions above, and encourage Parties and IAATO to consider these ideas, which we aim to develop further.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, there is no panacea to managing rapid tourism growth, and slow tourism is no exception. Potential “slower tourism” modalities – such as “base camps” – would need to be subject to impact assessments and mitigation measures to ensure that they do not inadvertently create greater impacts or problems than those it is trying to solve.

Developing a new paradigm for lower-impact slow tourism would require a suite of policy actions that build on the existing corpus of Antarctic Treaty system instruments and previous experience but also go beyond those. Indeed, it requires the development of a “comprehensive framework” for Antarctic tourism. Important elements of this framework for ATCPs to consider would include:

* Encouraging low impact modalities of tourism – slow tourism being (only) one of them;
* Ensuring consistent assessment of tourism activities;
* Developing dedicated programs for monitoring of tourism impacts;
* Expanding area protection under Annex V; and
* Evaluating the effectiveness of existing tourism regulation.

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1. ATCM XLIV Final Report, paragraphs 314-316. ASOC introduced an earlier version of this paper at the informal workshop “The future of Antarctic tourism: towards a strategic vision and policy” jointly convened by France and the Netherlands (8-10 March 2023, Paris). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also ASOC 2018, 2019, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Klarin et al, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cajiao & Leung (2022) suggest that the inherent challenges of voyaging in the polar environment “may facilitate what the academic literature refers to as a slow tourism experience”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. IAATO bylaws, II - Section H – “To create a corps of ambassadors for the continued protection of Antarctica through education and the opportunity to experience the continent first hand.” https://iaato.org/about-iaato/our-mission/bylaws/. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Resolution 7 (2009) - ATCM XXXII - CEP XII, Baltimore.](https://www.ats.aq/devAS/Meetings/Measure/448) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lowry & Lee, 2016; Calzati & de Salvo, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Calzati & de Salvo, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matos, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lowry & Lee , 2016 and references. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Matos, 2004; Hall, 2009; Calzati & di Salvo, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g. Roura, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://oceanwide-expeditions.com/to-do/outdoor-activities/basecamp-trips. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Roura & Gallo, in prep. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)