Report of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators 2020-21

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Under Article III (2) of the Antarctic Treaty

Introduction

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) is pleased to report its activities to ATCM XLIII.

IAATO continues to focus activities in support of its mission statement to advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel to Antarctica. Further information on IAATO, its mission statement, primary activities and recent developments can be found at: [www.iaato.org](http://www.iaato.org/).

Overview

Thirty years ago, IAATO was created with a commitment to safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel. IAATO has maintained that focus through three major growth periods and their ensuing downturns, drawing on the strength of its membership and stakeholders to enhance procedures and management. The 2019-20 season saw a record number of visitors travelling with IAATO Operators (74,401). The 2020-21 season was in sharp contrast to that with only two individual expeditions, comprised of three yachts and a total of 15 guests due to the SARS CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic.

While it is difficult to say when operations will return to levels approaching pre-COVID-19, IAATO’s commitment to safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel is unchanged and enduring. During the last twelve months, there has been a significant focus on addressing operational changes due to COVID-19, but the association has also been looking ahead to address the future growth that is anticipated post-pandemic. Recent actions include the strengthening of requirements for field staff experience, the creation of new working groups and committees, a refresh of the Antarctic Ambassadors program and strengthening of operations in the vicinity of whales.

For further information on IAATO operators’ activities can be found in *ATCM XLIII IPxx IAATO Overview of Antarctic Tourism: A Historical Review of Growth, the 2020-21 Season and Preliminary Estimates for 2021-22*

COVID-19 Response and impact on IAATO Membership

When the 2019-20 season was curtailed due to global concerns around COVID-19, IAATO and its members began preparing for the 2020-21 season with a focus on emerging challenges related to the pandemic. The IAATO COVID-19 Steering Group (now the IAATO COVID-19 Advisory Group) was formed to share information regularly with the membership, including updates from gateway ports and information regarding the evolving advice on how to operate safe and environmentally responsible travel during the pandemic. Additionally, two virtual Town Halls were hosted by IAATO to allow the membership to share perspectives and lessons learned on operating in this new environment which is key to the development of industry best practice.

The COVID-19 Advisory Group also provided Operators with a framework to assist them in preparing their own risk assessment. Since IAATO Operators each have their own specific operating environments, each must individually analyze every element of their operation in order to address the challenges that COVID-19 has presented, taking into account the relevant requirement of their respective national competent authorities, flag requirements where applicable, as well as the perspective and input given to them from the gateway ports.

Additionally, during this time, IAATO welcomed engaging regularly with COMNAP and SCAR in the spirit of sharing best practice, knowledge and to enhance understanding of the impact of the pandemic on Antarctica.

The majority of IAATO Operators had made the decision not to operate during the 2020-21 season by November 2020 and, ultimately, the season was limited to only two expeditions.

Following IAATO’s 2020 Annual Meeting, IAATO membership comprised 42 Operators, 14 Provisional Operators and 53 Associates (totalling 113 members). Subsequently, there has been an increase in Provisional Operators but a net decrease in membership due to several Associate Members leaving as a result of the pandemic. Currently there are 109 members. It is anticipated that there will be additional changes to IAATO’s membership if IAATO Operators are unable to operate during the northern summer season and if those challenges continue into the 2021-22 Antarctic season.

IAATO members organise or depart from 15 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties. During the 2019-20 season, the majority of nationals (95.5%) carried by IAATO Operators came from 51 Treaty Parties; the remainder came from a further 53 non-Treaty Party countries.

The Membership Directory and additional information on IAATO member activities can be found at [www.iaato.org](http://www.iaato.org/).

***IAATO Annual Meeting***

IAATO’s 2021 Annual Meeting was held virtually on 11-13 May 2021. Prior to the Annual Meeting were two COVID-19 focused Town Halls and three other Town Hall meetings to address priority items such as enhancing certain bylaws and reviewing terms of reference for IAATO committees. Agenda items at these Town Halls and the Annual Meeting included:

* Creation of the Deep Field/Air Operations and Climate Change Committees (both previously Working Groups)
* Creation of the Submersible Working Group
* Strengthening of requirements regarding field staff experience, as well as the establishing the requirement that all expedition team members take and pass the relevant IAATO Field Staff Assessment.
* Revision and strengthening of the Mandatory Observer Programme checklists.
* Review and updates to the guidelines related to biosecurity and wildlife viewing with a focus on bird and seal watching guidelines.
* Agreement to make mandatory the previously voluntary speed limit of 10 knots within IAATO’s geofenced-time areas, with certain emergency and safety exceptions available to mitigate against whale strikes. Agreement to develop process to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the geofenced time area.
* Approval of collaboration between SOOS DueSouth and IAATO.

***IAATO Support of Research & Conservation***

IAATO encourages collaborative opportunities with scientific organisations particularly where these enhance the Antarctic community’s understanding of human activities in the region and support IAATO in delivering safe, environmentally responsible private-sector travel. Projects include(d):

* IAATO/SCAR Systematic Conservation Plan – Expansion of human activity in the Antarctic Peninsula combined with a need to better understand and protect important areas for terrestrial biodiversity led IAATO and SCAR to propose the development of a Systematic Conservation Plan. The SCP is a support tool for decision-making and management, capable of utilising a huge amount of data to generate different scenarios depending on questions being asked or uncertainties being addressed. IAATO is expecting delivery of a final report from Monash University during Q3 2021. IAATO will discuss use of the tool with its members and work with SCAR on communicating the outcomes of the SCP with stakeholders.
* SC-HASS Research Project: The impact of COVID-19 on Antarctica – IAATO is involved in the SCAR Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences research project, [Work Package 3](https://www.scar.org/science/hass/covid-project/wp3/), to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on Antarctic tourism, including operations, policy and permitting.
* IAATO/COMNAP Fellowships – IAATO, in partnership with COMNAP, will invest in the development of early-career researchers by awarding its third $15,000 Fellowship in 2021. IAATO and COMNAP jointly awarded a [2020 fellowship](https://iaato.org/antarctic-fellowship-2020-recipient-announced/) to early career researcher Miguel González Pleiter from the University of Alcala, Spain for his work on microplastics.
* Support in Antarctica – IAATO Operator expeditions during the 2020-21 season were limited to two individual expeditions, comprised of three yachts. One of these expeditions collected data for the long-term monitoring project Penguin Lifelines, University of Oxford. Three IAATO Operators also provided dedicated air or vessel support to National Antarctic Programs.

***Other Work and Activities***

IAATO also continues to prioritise activities that strengthen its institutional structure and help position it as a reputable, valued partner in the wider polar community. Over the past year these have included:

* Development of an awareness campaign regarding IAATO’s 30th Anniversary which highlights past accomplishments and discusses ambitions for the future
* Completion of Phase 1 of the IAATO database to facilitate efficient tools and reporting capabilities
* Development of the Antarctic Ambassadors landing page on IAATO’s website and strategic plan to further strengthen the engagement with visitors to Antarctica
* Continued collaboration with the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operations (AECO) regarding Polar Field Staff Standards and joint Town Hall session with polar field staff

In addition, IAATO Secretariat staff and Operator representatives participated in internal and external meetings, liaising with Treaty Party Representatives, National Antarctic Programs personnel, and governmental, scientific, environmental, and industry organisations, including but not limited to:

* **COMNAP Annual Meeting**, Online, August 2020
* **SCAR2020 Online**, August 2020
* **Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO) Conference & Annual Meeting***,* Online,October 2020
* **Thirty-ninth Meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR)**, Online, October 2020

Tourism Incidents 2020-21

IAATO’s policy is to disclose incidents to ensure risks are understood and appropriate lessons are learned for all Antarctic Operators. There were no major incidents involving IAATO Operators during the 2020-21 season.

With Thanks

IAATO appreciates the opportunity to work cooperatively with Antarctic Treaty Parties, COMNAP, SCAR, CCAMLR, IHO/HCA, WMO, ASOC and others toward the long-term protection of Antarctica.