Antarctic tourism policies after the “pandemic pause”

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**Information Paper submitted by ASOC**

***Summary***

The pause in Antarctic tourism caused by the pandemic is easing and recovery will be a matter of time (barring other global disruptions). Given that tourism is a highly dynamic activity, ASOC suggests that the ATCM should be proactive in identifying emerging tourism trends and shaping tourism management for the next decade. ASOC considers that it would be more fruitful if the ATCM focused on identifying concrete ways to anticipate and manage tourism pressure. This document examines potential Antarctic tourism developments following the coronavirus pandemic. Key actions for the ATCM include:

* Expanding area protection under Annex V;
* Developing dedicated programs for monitoring of tourism impacts;
* Ensuring consistent assessment of tourism activities;
* Evaluating the effectiveness of existing tourism regulation; and
* Encouraging low impact modalities of tourism.

***Introduction***

Over the last three decades, tourism has been one of the most discussed topics at the ATCM, including through numerous Intersessional Contact Groups (ICGs). However, many of these discussions have not resulted in significant policy action. ASOC has concluded that tourism requires instead pragmatic approaches (ASOC, 2019). In parallel, the seasons prior to the pandemic reached record levels of Antarctic visitors. Pre-pandemic trends pointed towards a quite significant growth of polar tourism in a few years hence, putting stress on the existing regulatory system for Antarctic tourism (ASOC, 2018). At the start of the 2019-2020 season, it was apparent that continued growth of Antarctic tourism could potentially lead to instances of “overtourism” – or rather its Antarctic equivalent – at some times and places (Roura, 2019).

Then COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. The year 2020 has been described as the “worst year on tourism history” for global tourism (UNWTO, 2021a).[[1]](#footnote-1) In Antarctica, the greatest effects were felt in the 2020-2021 season where there was practically no tourism (IAATO, 2021). The timing of Antarctic tourism recovery is unknown but it is apparent that the “pandemic pause” is easing and that tourism in the region will eventually rebound, barring the emergence of other global disruptions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given that tourism is a highly dynamic activity, the ATCM should be proactive in identifying emerging tourism trends and shaping tourism management for the next decade as activities in Antarctica resume. To what extent is this happening?

***Some recent developments***

Based on pre-pandemic trends, the two main vectors of Antarctic tourism recovery will more likely involve the resumption of “traditional” shipborne tourism, primarily focused in the Antarctic Peninsula area; and tourism in the Antarctic interior, which is air supported, land-based, and spread out over a large area. These activities target different but partly overlapping market segments and develop following different patterns.

Examples of recent developments that may anticipate future trends include:

* One of several forthcoming purpose-built luxury expedition ships was launched in 2020, and after sea tests it began operating in the Arctic in 2021. A hybrid-electric Polar Class 2 ice breaker, she reached the North Pole on 6 September 2021 (Nielsen, 2021).[[3]](#footnote-3)
* The first landing of an Airbus A340 took place in the polar plateau, about a five-hour flight south from Cape Town, in 2 November 2021 (Cormack, 2022).
* The first Antarctic tennis cruise has been announced for 2022-2023. It involves two tennis celebrities playing a show match in Antarctica in a high-end cruise that follows an otherwise standard itinerary. The higher-level cabins and packages enable greater access to the tennis celebrities through during “…private lunches, dinners, zodiac rides or cocktail parties, while guests of the top three suites will even get the chance to face the brothers on the court during a five-minute doubles rally” (Gross, 2021).
* Citizen science activities focusing on opportunistic data collection from cruise ships are becoming more common. Citizen science is not a substitute for“big science” or a justification to expand tourism, but may provide useful complementary data for Antarctic ecosystem protection (e.g. Johannessen et al, 2021).

These examples illustrate that the possibilities for expanding polar tourism and creating new tourism activities and packages are endless, particularly at the higher end of the market.

Some significant discussions have taken place intersessionally, building from the 2018 Rotterdam Antarctic Tourism workshop. Intersessional discussion on permanent tourism and non-governmental activities facilities post ATCM XLIII resulted in an inspiring exchange of ideas (Netherlands, 2022). Based on the performance of earlier ICGs on tourism (ASOC, 2019) it remains to be seen if the discussion will result in a breakthrough (a new perspective of examining land-based facilities associated with or used to support tourism) or avoid the central issue by excluding some current forms of land-based tourism or tourism support from closer scrutiny.

Relevant research initiatives underway include the Strategic Conservation Planning process led by SCAR and IAATO; and some international research programs focussing relevant to the management of tourism.[[4]](#footnote-4) ASOC welcomes current initiatives aiming at the conceptual and practical implementation of tourism monitoring (Ecuador, Spain and the United States, 2022; Germany, 2022).

***Key actions for the ATCM***

In recent years ASOC has recommended several key actions for the ATCM (ASOC 2018, 2019, 2021), with an emphasis on pragmatic, tangible actions. Most of these recommendations are still valid today. Key actions for the ATCM include:

* Expanding area protection under Annex V;
* Developing dedicated programs for monitoring of tourism impacts;
* Ensuring consistent assessment of tourism activities;
* Evaluating the effectiveness of existing tourism regulation; and
* Encouraging low impact modalities of tourism.

Some recent and ongoing initiatives or proposals currently under discussion are broadly compatible with several of these proposed actions. ASOC looks forward to seeing how these and other policies unfold in the near future as post-pandemic Antarctic tourism resumes.

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1. In January 2021, the UNWTO noted “Global tourism suffered its worst year on record in 2020, with international arrivals dropping by 74%... This compares with the 4% decline recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis.” (UNWTO, 2021a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a World Tourism Organization expert survey on global tourism recovery (excluding Antarctica), 45 percent of those polled projected that international tourism will recover to 2019 levels in 2024 or later, while 43 percent predicted a recovery in 2023 (UNWTO, 2021b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nuclear-powered icebreakers have transported passengers on voyages from Murmansk to the North Pole every summer since the early 1990s (Nilsen, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These include SCAR’s *Integrated Science to Inform Antarctic and Southern Ocean Conservation (ANT-Icon*); SCAR, IAATO and partners’ *Systematic Conservation Plan for the Antarctic Peninsula;* and two research programs funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO): the recently started *Proactive Management of Antarctic Tourism: Exploring the Role of ATS Principles and Values and Best Practices Beyond the ATS* (Pro-Act); and *Polar Tourism - Research Programme on Assessment of Impacts and Respons*es (PT-REPAIR) (under development). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)