Feedback on the monitoring on board tourist vessels conducted during the 2022 / 2023 season

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Summary

This Information Paper reports on the monitoring carried out under Resolution 9 (2021) *Voluntary on-board observer operational framework for vessel-based tourism in the Antarctic Treaty Area* during the 2022 / 2023 Antarctic season, in partnership between France and New Zealand and France and IAATO. It highlights the benefits and challenges of implementing R9 (2021) at the international level. It calls on Parties authorizing tourism activities to consider joining this international effort to better monitor tourism activities in Antarctica.

Background

Resolution 9 (2021) recommend that Parties monitor, on a voluntary basis, vessel-based tourism under their jurisdiction in the Antarctic Treaty area, based on the framework proposed by the Resolution. The Resolution further calls on Parties to cooperate in this context. In parallel, New Zealand has had an on-board observer scheme for New Zealand-approved Antarctic tour vessels since 1996, following the entry into force of the Environmental Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty. IAATO as well, has a Mandatory observer scheme on-board its Operator’s vessel.

France and IAATO joint monitoring

Between November 27 and December 8, 2022, France, through its National Competent Authority (NCA), the “Prefet, administrateur supérieur des Terres australes et antarctiques françaises” (TAAF) and IAATO conducted a joint monitoring on board *Le* *Commandant Charcot*, from the company Ponant. The vessel was to be observed in accordance with the IAATO scheme schedule. It visited the north-east peninsula (Weddell Sea).

The observer was a public officer specialized in maritime affairs issues, including the monitoring and control of activities at sea. He was proposed by France, and had to pass the IAATO online assessment, guaranteeing his good knowledge of the Antarctic and of the regulations and directives in force. He carried out a monitoring under R9 (2021), according to the "monitoring checklist" provided by the Resolution, and reported to the French ANC in accordance with this framework. At the same time, he carried out an IAATO observation under the “IAATO Mandatory Observation Scheme” and provided a report to IAATO on this basis. The observer reported no difficulties in completing both reports, which were found to be similar.

Regarding financial aspects, the operator, Ponant, provided free boarding. France covered the observer’s salary, IAATO took care of transit costs to and from the ship.

New Zealand and France joint monitoring

Between February 14 and March 12, 2023, New Zealand and France, through their respective National Competent Authorities, conducted joint monitoring on board the same vessel, *Le* *Commandant Charcot*, which departed from New Zealand (Dunedin) to Argentina (Ushuaia).

The observer was selected and appointed by New Zealand. She was trained by New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Conservation, and Antarctica New Zealand, and met every expectation listed by R9 (2021).

New Zealand provided the observer with all relevant and required information and documentation, such as relevant management plans; relevant site-specific guidelines; health & safety guidance; etc. Specific equipment including a satellite phone, and appropriate clothing and gear were also provided by New Zealand.

The observer reported to New Zealand and France on the operator’s compliance with the national authorisations that reflected the requirements of the Antarctic Treaty, its Environmental Protocol and relevant Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting instruments. The observer considered issues set out in the compliance section of the voluntary on-board observer framework, particularly the operator’s impact on the Antarctic environment and dependant and associated ecosystems.

The observer’s overall assessment was that the expedition’s staff were well experienced and trained in the requirements of the Antarctic Treaty System, and the operator’s activities were implemented with due care and respect to the Antarctic Environment. Ponant’s *Le Commandant Charcot* operated with minimal environmental impact, having been designed with high environmental specifications that were evident to be successful throughout the voyage. Compulsory briefings were provided to all passengers on specific activities, and site visits were conducted with site-specific guidelines.

International benefits of on-board monitoring

Overall benefits of the implementation of on-board monitoring

The above-described monitoring has met objectives set by R9 (2021), as well as the ATCM Multi-Year Strategic Work Plan, particularly Priorities 11 and 12 by:

* Allowing NCAs to monitor the consistency with domestic and international regulations and standards adopted within the Antarctic Treaty System framework (regulations from the Antarctic Treaty; the Environment Protocol and its annexes; Measures, Resolutions and Recommendations set out by the ATCM; information provided for the application; and domestic authorisations mechanisms).
* Enhancing New Zealand and France NCAs’ understanding of activities they authorise in the Antarctic Treaty area, and knowledge of visited sites and operator practices. A better understanding of field activities allowing NCAs to carry out their duties more effectively, in line with the actual operations.
* Contributing to strengthen the dialogue between Parties, IAATO and tourist operators (*i.e.,* Ponant) in Antarctica.
* Promoting and supporting responsible and supervised tourism practices in Antarctica.
* Monitoring the effectiveness of guidelines (*e.g.,* Visitor Site Guidelines).
* Providing the opportunity for the observer to carry out basic landing site monitoring.

Operational and financial benefits of the implementation of on-board monitoring

Beyond these general interests, such partnership allows for logistical, operational and financial benefits.

Financial aspects

It allows for a more cost-effective approach for NCAs, within the framework of a NCA / IAATO cooperation, thanks to the payment of transportation costs by IAATO. These costs represent a significant part of the total budget of the operation.

A cooperation between two NCAs also offers great opportunities for cost sharing and pooling. For example, the pooling of an observer moving from one NCA vessel to another from the same port of departure and arrival would significantly reduce transportation costs. This deserves further attention.

Operational aspects

From an operational perspective, a cooperation between an NCA and IAATO, such as the one described above, streamlines and facilitates the observation process. It allows simultaneous observations in accordance with R9 (2021) and the IAATO Mandatory Scheme, limiting the burden for the operator in terms of additional passengers to be accommodated on board.

Cooperation between NCAs also facilitates operational aspects. France was therefore able to monitor the cruise from New Zealand to Argentina, thanks to New Zealand. In general, international collaboration opens up new possibilities by overcoming certain logistical challenges.

International and “inter-actors” cooperation

Beyond financial and operational aspects, international cooperation strengthens the relationships between NCAs, and between NCAs and IAATO, in line with the spirit of the Antarctic Treaty System.

Challenges

Generally speaking, ATCPs wishing to engage in such process may face two main challenges:

1. The willingness of operators to collaborate and accommodate an additional passenger on board. The experiences reported in this IP provide a good example of effective collaboration.
2. The logistical arrangements, responsibilities and financial modalities must be discussed well ahead of the cruise. Work is needed to design robust, long-term solutions in order to achieve a sustainable cooperation for broader implementation of these schemes.

Recommendations

Large-scale implementation of on-board monitoring at the international level will increase the above benefits, pooling possibilities, cost sharing opportunities, etc. France and New Zealand encourage interested Parties to consider the implementation of R9 (2021). They remain fully available to discuss this issue.

Logistical and financial arrangements for the observations are key issues for a broader implementation of R9 (2021). France and New Zealand encourage Parties to include this issue in a broader discussion on tourism or environmental monitoring.