More data needed to manage air-supported land-based tourism

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Summary

The focus of current discussions on tourism management have mainly been focused on cruise tourism, which is both relevant and understandable due to its nature and role as the key driver of Antarctic tourism. Air-supported land-based activities seem to be increasing. Information is also required for Parties to be able to assess and understand trends and change in air-supported land-based tourism. Lack of information impairs our ability to consider management needs. Mechanisms for standard post-visit reporting for air-borne tourism are proposed.

Background

There has been a substantial growth of tourism (e.g, in the numbers of tourists, ships and visited sites) and diversification of activities. This and likelihood that increasing pressures from tourism in conjunction with climate change, scientific activities etc will significantly impact the Antarctic environment has been the foundation for regular discussions in the ATCM about its responsibility for managing Antarctic tourism. Over the last few years these discussions have intensified, supported by informal workshop discussions, in Rotterdam (2019) and Paris (2023).

Underlying as a fundament to these discussions is the designation of Antarctica as a natural reserve, the environmental principles of Article 3 of the Protocol, and the General Principles of Antarctic Tourism contained in Resolution 7(2009).

The focus of these discussions have mainly been concentrated on cruise tourism, which is both relevant and understandable due to its nature and role as the key driver of Antarctic tourism.

However, in many and most of the ongoing discussions it would also be relevant to consider air-supported land-based/deep-field tourism. This is particularly relevant if we wish to be in advance of unforeseen future challenges, rather than being forced to resort to reactive action, which has to a large degree been the case for the cruise tourism management.

There are currently three operators that deliver air-supported land-based tourism activities in Antarctica, all operating at high standards and with a high level of focus on environment and safety. However, an increase in land-based tourism and a potential larger diversification of operators may give cause for concern. On a very general level current operations can be described to include inter-continental flight from one of the gateway cities to airfields in Antarctica, field camp activity and intra-continental flights to points of interest. Some operators are also using other means of transportation, like 4X4 vehicles. Main camps with landing facilities for intercontinental flights are found at Novo Airfield and Wolf’s Fang in Dronning Maud Land and at Union Glacier in Ellsworth Land.

Why the concern?

Since land-based tourism in Antarctica is mainly based on the use of aircrafts, the means of transportation have other environmental impacts and other safety concerns than cruise tourism. Another aspect is that the locations used for land-based tourism can have other characteristics than the sites visited by vessel-based tourism. Both the environmental and the intrinsic values will have different traits than the values affected by vessel-based tourism. Land based tourism may be more remote, more widely distributed on the continent and may take place on locations that are less well known, both to operators and to Parties.

Land-based tourism is varied and can potentially have several types of environmental impacts, like disturbance of flora and fauna, fuel spill, tracks after vehicles, ground disturbances after deep field camps, littering or other traces of activity. It might be challenging to assess cumulative impacts without quite detailed information on e.g. what activity has taken place where and when and with how many participants.

Land based tourism can easily reach more extreme locations and can operate in colder conditions and higher altitudes. This demands more of the participants when it comes to experience, fitness and knowledge of the use of emergency equipment. Search and rescue operations can be even more challenging when it comes to land-based tourism. The remote locations can be both difficult to reach and unknown to the potential rescue team. Rescuers will often be dependent on air transport to reach the site. The number of available aircrafts on the continent is limited, and at some locations landing can be impossible. There is a risk that the burden of a search and rescue operation falls upon a single national program. With incidents in connection with cruise tourism other cruise operators are likely to assist.

Numbers and information

Proper management and regulatory action is reliant on good information. To be able to assess the status and to understand trends and changes of tourism there is an underlying need for information on the relevant patterns and numbers. Parties now have access to valuable and extensive information on cruise-based activities, based on the data collected through the post-visit report forms – PVRs – last updated through Resolution 6 (2022).

Information is also required if Parties are to be able to assess and understand trends and change in air-supported land-based tourism. Information relating both to flights (intercontinental and intracontinental), number of passengers, destination, activities at destinations etc is needed.

In ATCM XLIV IP 72 IAATO presented numbers relating to land-based activities that shows what looks like a considerable increase in such tourism, specifically with regard to intra-continental flights, in the period between 2016-17 to 2021-22. For example, visits to emperor penguin increased from 50 to 200 passengers, deep field experiences from 51 to 289 passengers and visits to Vinson Massif from 111 to 202. I the same period the total number of passengers on intra-continental flights increased from 488 to 937.

IAATO has been so kind to give us access to some of the underlying numbers from the 2015-16 season up to the 2021-22 season. The level of detail in the reporting has increased in this period, the reporting form seems to have varied, and we must make reservations that we may have misunderstood. From what we can understand there has been a noticeable increase in the use of both intra continental flights and vehicles in connection with deep-field tourism during the years before the pandemic, cf. table 1. The 2021-22 season could be understood in light of the pandemic.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Season | Intracontinental flights (times used) | Vehicles (times used) |
| 2015-16 | 20 | 2 |
| 2016-17 | 3 | 12 |
| 2017-2018 | 59 | 33 |
| 2018-2019 | 56 | 22 |
| 2021-22 | 26 | 13 |

*Table 1: Summary of times intracontinental flights and vehicles are used in connection with tourism, based on our interpretation of numbers from IAATO.*

In EIES the sum of participants in Land-based operations for the 2021/2022 annual reporting is 278. This gives reason to believe that the reporting is incomplete. This can be either because some Parties have not reported, or because the reporting is incomplete. The latter may possibly be related to how the form is designed.

In comparison, we have considerably more detailed information available when it comes to cruise tourism. The Post Visit Reports provides detailed information on visited sites with precise coordinates, dates, if the visit included landings, number of visitors, activities conducted and duration of landings. In Resolution 6 (2022) Parties noted the convenience of obtaining consistent information that would facilitate the analysis of the scope, frequency and intensity of tourism and non-governmental activities.

Some operators provide information on intracontinental flying destinations on their web pages, but in addition to the routes showed here they might have tailor-made expeditions that involve flying to other destinations.

Conclusion

From the above it can be deduced that there is a lack of access to robust data about air-supported land-based tourism, which is an obstacle to having a good understanding of the current status, trends and changes. This lack of information impairs our ability to consider management needs. The information provided in the EIES seems to be incomplete and deficient. It is suggested that the EIES is adjusted to provide more information than currently required with respect to land-based tourism (total number of participants, date of commence and completion, location and route, aircraft and/or vehicles used, number of clients, guides, crew and observers taking part, activity sites and activities conducted at each site). If there is agreement in this regard, then it is assumed that the Secretariat can assist with this task.

At ATCM XLIV IAATO noted that the current Post Visit Reports (cf. last updated through Resolution 6 (2022)) are tailored for sea borne tourism activities and suggested it might be useful to also develop PVRs for deep-field and air activities (para 320 of the Final Report of ATCM XLIV).

It is suggested that Parties agree to formalise standard post visit reporting also for air-supported tourism activities, in line with what is currently formalised for cruise-tourism through Resolution 6 (2022), in order to ensure that Parties in the future have sufficient data avaliable to follow and understand the development of such activities. We have understood that IAATO is already developing a Post Visit Report for land-based tourism, and it may be reasonable to endorse this as soon as it is complete and available.

Recommendation

Norway suggest that Parties ensure more detailed information on airborne tourism as basis for understanding the development of such tourism and for assessing relevant management tools, and to consider the following actions:

1. Allow for more detailed information on land based tourism submitted through the EIES, specifically the total number of participants and detailed information on each expedition including date of commence and completion, location and route, aircraft and/or vehicles used, number of clients, guides, crew and observers taking part, activity sites and activities conducted at each site. Request the Secretariat to update the EIES for this purpose.
2. Agree that it is desirable to adopt mandatory standardised Post Visit Report for land-based tourism and agree to consider the PVR currently being developed by IAATO as basis for this when available.