

Editorial

The apparently inexorable rise of Antarctic tourism

Tourism is a subject that is now frequently raised in discussions around the protection and management of Antarctica. After the brief hiatus resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry has bounced back to successive record numbers, with ~103 000 tourist visitors in 2022/2023 and a predicted 117 000 for the current 2023/2024 season, along with a surge in the construction of cruise vessels designed with operations in the polar regions in mind. When simply plotted on a graph, the rise in these numbers since the early days of the industry is clearly exponential. On the face of it, the numbers are large, far larger than the often quoted 4500–5000 national operator staff travelling to the continent's research stations each year, although still very limited compared to other parts of the global ecotourism industry.

Amongst the highlights for any tourist visiting Antarctica, and indeed for national operator staff as they travel to and from their research stations or on their research cruises, are the chances to land on the continent and offshore islands and be immersed in the exceptional wildlife, stunning scenery and 'wilderness experience'. These landings immediately highlight one of the key vulnerabilities of Antarctica: most landings, just like most research stations, inevitably are located in the very limited areas of ice-free ground, concentrating whatever impacts take place in the fragile and slow-to-recover ecosystems of these areas. Increasing numbers of visitors and vessels, and the increasing ice-navigation capabilities of the latter, also lead to pressures to discover and use new, less visited or more remote locations.

The increasing numbers of tourists have, therefore, inevitably attracted attention, both in terms of publicity and from international media, and have led to calls for regulation through the governing system of Antarctica, the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCMs). Thus, there is now increasing pressure on Consultative Parties, not least at the upcoming ATCM in India later this year, to be seen to start to take real steps towards the development of some form of 'tourism convention' to provide a solid foundation for future regulation of the industry's activities within and around Antarctica.

However, all of this pressure does raise some old and inconvenient questions for the Consultative Parties, in a global environment where the ATCM is already facing increasingly loud questions about its effectiveness, accountability and representativeness. Perhaps central to these, given that the purpose of any such convention will be presented in terms of protecting Antarctica, is the basic question of 'what is the problem being faced?'. It is all too easy to simply equate 'number' with 'problem' and, hence, 'bigger number' with 'bigger problem'. However, a fundamental tenet of any risk assessment process is to be able to identify the most important risks (or areas of greatest damage), such that measures can be put in place that can effectively address those first. Implicitly, the 'problem' being raised in any discussions around numbers of people visiting Antarctica is that of the different ways in which their visits can result in 'damage' to the Antarctic environment and, resulting from this, the identification of what preventative or remediation measures are required, and where and who these measures need to be applied to.

So, in any discussion that is centred on the prevention of future damage to Antarctica, in the ATCM or elsewhere, it must be pertinent to stand back and ask the obvious question of, in the ~75 year history of the Antarctic Treaty or ~50 year history of the Antarctic tourism industry, 'what has caused and is now causing damage to the Antarctic environment?'. When looked at through this historical lens, it quickly becomes clear that the answer is not a simple 'tourism bad, national operator good', even though this is a dichotomy that implicitly underlies some statements to date from Consultative Parties. Indeed, if anything, the reverse is the case. National operators, in both their historical operations and current large-scale building activities, are wholly responsible for considerable cumulative environmental damage to multiple heavily used parts of the Antarctic, even though all such developments have gone through and been approved by the then-existing environmental protection requirements of the Treaty System (currently the environmental impact assessment requirements of the Environmental Protocol), raising serious and unaddressed questions about their appropriateness and effectiveness. They are also almost entirely responsible for all known instances of alien species establishment since the mid-twentieth century in both the Antarctic Treaty area and the sub-Antarctic islands. Indeed, in terms of regulation, although no 'legally binding' instruments are in place under the Environmental Protocol - and the ATCM has still made little or no progress towards finalizing or adopting the 'liability annex' intended to form part of the Protocol - education about and application of biosecurity measures are far more developed and uniformly applied within the tourism industry than they are across many national operators.

The question could, and should, be raised as to whether some of the current and deliberate attention focusing on the tourism industry is an appropriate response to an actual threat or is more accurately a smokescreen to divert attention from the already documented and largely unaddressed environmental threats and actual damage resulting from national operator activities. It is clear that the expansion of station facilities and wider impacts, both through the inexorable development over time of individual nations' stations and the failure to effectively manage multi-operator locations such as Fildes Peninsula, have effectively led to serious environmental degradation in these areas, which are now little more than brownfield or sacrificial sites.

Even the application of what should be positive conservation and protection measures, such as the designation of historical sites and monuments (HSMs), can have the appearance of being misused. My own recent research season, supported by a tourist vessel, included a visit to Whalers Bay on Deception Island, which year on year is one of the most popular visitor sites in Antarctica for both cruise and national operator vessels (and it is undeniably clear from even a cursory examination of social media posts that those landing from both benefit from pretty well exactly the same 'tourist' experience!). For me, the most striking and depressing impression from that visit was the decrepit state and level of collapse and decay of parts of this declared HSM since the last time I had been there ~15 years previously, and particularly of the remains of the old UK station buildings and aircraft hangar. The area is now little more than a rubbish tip, with debris from the part-collapsed buildings and their contents strewn around the site. This is a site formally managed by three Parties, who appear to work to very different definitions or understandings of the words 'heritage' and 'management'. But, however much they can pass the buck to each other in terms of explaining who or what is responsible for the lack of action, the end result is that this HSM is now an embarrassing and highly public demonstration of the inability of the ATCM's own systems and Parties to effectively protect and manage this part of the Antarctic environment and human activities therein.

With this season's experience in mind, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that Parties' first priority should be to be able to demonstrate, far more convincingly than is presently the case, that they collectively have the will and ability to 'clean up their own backyards'. This would give a far stronger and more credible base from which to take the practical lead in developing future environmental regulations that should apply to all users of Antarctica.

Effective protection of the Antarctic environment and regulation of our activities within it is clearly vital for the future of this exceptional region. It has to be hoped that this will be achieved through open and honest debate, objective assessment and use of evidence and effective international engagement and cooperation.

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