

Increased diversity of private expeditions poses challenge



THE 2000-01 SUMMER SEASON SAW CONTINUED GROWTH in tourism and non-government activity in Antarctica. More companies became involved, with a wider range of activities, and private adventurers pushed further afield. Some companies provided mountaineering, skiing, hiking and other opportunities in the Peninsula region, and at least two companies offered overnight stays ashore. Kayaking has become a part of some itineraries, while SCUBA diving was also offered.

In response to market demand, tour companies are considering further expansion of their on-shore activities in 2001-02 and, if the trend continues, increasing pressures on land use is inevitable. As yet there appear to be no plans to establish permanent on-shore accommodation, but this cannot be ruled out in the future.

Concerns have been expressed that the annual creep in the extent, range, and diversity of Antarctic tourist and adventure activities may outstrip the land management practices developed by the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) over the past forty years to deal with them, particularly in the Antarctic Peninsula area. While the present situation is not critical, little of the work currently under way within the ATS is focussed on the regional-scale issues involved, and experiences in other parts of the world suggest that there is the potential to cause problems in later decades if the issues are not addressed.

While the ATS has specific arrangements to deal with

relatively small areas under the Protected Area System, no broad-scale land management practices capable of dealing with increasing extent and diversity of land-based recreational activity have been developed.

Traditionally, ship and yacht operators have supported relatively brief shore visits to continental and island sites. People going ashore were generally only able to visit relatively small areas, a practice that has given rise to various studies on individual site characteristics and potential cumulative impacts. More recently, however, as companies work to develop market specialisation and adventurers seek novel challenges, the type and distribution of activities has diversified markedly.

While it appears that such activities are being conducted responsibly, the companies involved plan their activities independently. To avoid conflicts between activities, and to minimise the potential environmental impacts, a more coordinated regional approach is likely to become necessary. Researchers from a number of nations are examining the effects on individual species of human disturbance and work has commenced on studying the potential cumulative impacts of tourism. The challenge for the ATS (particularly the CEP) is to be prepared to meet the growth of non-government interest in the Antarctic with timely and effective environment protection strategies.

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