

# Better management of Antarctic tourism

Some 28 000 tourists visited Antarctica last year, almost five times the visitor numbers a decade ago. While this is negligible in global terms, there are now more tourists visiting Antarctica than national program personnel, although their time in the region is much shorter.

Antarctic tourists engage in a broad range of activities, including small boat cruising, flight-seeing, kayaking, mountain climbing, scuba diving, skiing, camping and marathon running. The individual and cumulative impacts of these activities need to be managed as they may result in environmental impacts (including disturbance of wildlife); may damage fragile cultural and historic sites; and may pose safety risks for those involved.

Together with our Antarctic Treaty partners, Australia is working to improve the management of Antarctic tourism. This work aims to ensure that tourism is sustainable; balancing the economic interests of the tour operators with the need to protect Antarctica's environment and ensuring that tourism does not disrupt other established uses of Antarctica.

Antarctic tourism was the focus of discussions at a Meeting of Experts held in Norway last March, and at the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) held in Cape Town in May. Australia was represented at these meetings by government and industry and is taking an active role in the informal discussions between meetings.

A number of proposals aimed at managing potential impacts have emerged, with Australia taking the lead on several, including:

- **Database** – establishing a comprehensive database on Antarctic tourism and other non-government activities, to help inform management decisions.
- **Accreditation** – ensuring that Antarctic tour operators conduct their activities to a high standard.
- **Quarantine** – undertaking assessments of the potential risks to Antarctica, posed by tourism, of introducing alien species to Antarctica and translocation of species within Antarctica and adopting quarantine practices that minimise the risk.

- **Contingency planning** – ensuring that contingency plans and other arrangements for health and safety, search and rescue, and medical care and evacuation, have been drawn up and are in place for proposed tourism activities; and that adequate insurance or other arrangements are set up to cover costs associated with these.
- **Shipping guidelines** – developing in consultation with the International Maritime Organisation, voluntary guidelines for ships operating in Antarctic ice-covered waters that will improve the safety of tour vessels.
- **Cumulative impacts** – assessing the cumulative environmental impacts of Antarctic tour operators' activities at frequently visited or fragile sites.
- **Permanent infrastructure** – considering whether to limit Antarctic tourism to activities that have no more than a minor or transitory impact.

The 27th ATCM agreed on a number of new arrangements for managing Antarctic tourism arising from the above and initiated work on others.

ATCM adopted a Measure and a Resolution calling on all Parties to ensure that those involved in tourist or other non-government activities implement contingency plans and put in place adequate insurance arrangements. The ATCM also agreed to establish an intersessional contact group to develop further the basis for an accreditation scheme for Antarctic tour operators. Next year's ATCM will also examine the privacy and confidentiality of information proposed to be held on the tourism database, quarantine risk assessment, and the merits of limiting permanent tourist infrastructure.

Australia's positions on these issues are being informed through consultation with other governmental agencies, Australian Antarctic tour companies, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators and environmental interest groups. We anticipate working in close partnership with Australian Antarctic tour operators in an effort to continue to develop their international reputation as a socially responsible and sustainable industry.

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The Antarctic Treaty partners are working to ensure tourism activities in Antarctica are sustainable.

