



Site guidelines for popular tourist destinations in Antarctica, such as Cuverville Island off the Antarctic Peninsula, are the latest step in the effort to manage Antarctic tourism to the highest possible standards.

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TREADING LIGHTLY ON THE ICE

Once a year Antarctic Treaty delegates meet to share information, update the rules governing the frozen continent, and recommend actions their governments should take to uphold the principles of the Antarctic Treaty. Australia sends a sizeable delegation, including the Antarctic Division's Director, Chief Scientist, and senior policy advisers.

The latest (29th) Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting was hosted by the United Kingdom in Edinburgh, in June 2006. One clear theme emerged; when people gather to talk about the state and future of Antarctica, the conversation turns to how we can tread lightly on the frozen wilderness.

Aliens in Antarctica

One devastating footprint that Antarctic visitors – scientists and tourists alike – need to avoid leaving behind is the accidental introduction of alien species. Non-native animals, plants or diseases can all travel south as unwelcome stowaways on ships, aircraft, clothing and equipment.

Australia brought the alarming potential consequences of introduced species to the attention of fellow Treaty Parties in 2005. This sparked a special workshop on the 'quarantine' or 'biosecurity' question.

The June 2006 meeting adopted practical guidelines to prevent the transport in ships'

ballast water of invasive marine organisms, either to the Antarctic, or between biologically distinct regions within the Antarctic. Ships are urged not to discharge ballast water in Antarctic waters at all, or to flush out and refill their ballast tanks en route, to minimise the risks.

Better guidelines for tourists

At home, hikers and campers aim to take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but footprints. Antarctic tourists are exhorted not even to leave footprints (at least in vegetation), to avoid damaging the wilderness that attracted them to Antarctica in the first place.

The Antarctic Treaty meeting made tourist visits to the most popular Antarctic sites subject to comprehensive site-specific guidelines. Australia sponsored and helped design the new guidelines, in line with the Government's policy that Antarctic tourism should be both ecologically sustainable and socially responsible. The new guidelines – for 12 sites in the South Shetland Islands and the Gerlache Strait region – are the latest step in the effort to manage Antarctic tourism to the highest possible standards.

Over 25 000 tourists set foot on Antarctica in 2005-06, but most of their landings took place at just a handful of sites. The new guidelines set

high standards of behaviour and sensible controls on the number of visits, to help visitors tread lightly on these sites.

The International Polar Year

Looking ahead, the meeting reviewed plans for a major focus on polar research activities from 2007 to 2009, during the International Polar Year. Treaty Parties issued an *Edinburgh Antarctic Declaration on the International Polar Year*, to reaffirm their political, logistical and financial commitment to the year and to ongoing cooperation in Antarctica.

There was a sense among delegates that the IPY, which includes studies of human impacts on the Antarctic environment, should endeavour not to extend the human footprint through its own activities. In other words, delegates envisaged the IPY's legacy as knowledge, which will enable the world to understand and value the Antarctic environment, rather than a series of construction projects for new Antarctic facilities.

India will host the next Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in New Delhi, April-May 2007.

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