

Kayaking and other tourism activities are increasing in popularity in Antarctica. Wilhelmina Bay, Antarctic Peninsula, February 2005.

Antarctic tourism: more growth, new guidelines

Over 26 650 tourists visited Antarctica in the 2004–05 season, up 13 per cent from the previous year. This remarkable rate of growth keeps tourism firmly on the agenda of the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Treaty Parties are conscious that while the range of tourism activities is expanding – wildlife photography, heritage tours, zodiac cruising, hiking, climbing, diving, kayaking, skiing, camping and sailing – the geographic range of tourism, and therefore its potential environmental impacts, remains concentrated. The Antarctic Peninsula, off the tip of South America, accounted for over 99 per cent of all Antarctic tourists in 2004–05. Three-quarters of ship-borne tourists step ashore at some point in their cruise, and three-quarters of these landings occur at just 20 sites.

This year's Treaty meeting in Stockholm adopted the first site-specific guidelines for frequently visited sites on the Antarctic Peninsula. Consistent with Australia's policy on Antarctic tourism, launched in March 2004, Australia co-sponsored the guidelines which were proposed by the United Kingdom.

The guidelines cover Penguin Island, Aitcho Islands, Cuverville Island and Jougla Point on Wiencke Island. Each set describes the site, its wildlife and visitor pressures, and includes a map and a visitor code of conduct. The guidelines confine landings to ships with a maximum of 200 or 500 passengers, depending on the sensitivity of the site, suggest time limits of six or eight hours ashore during peak breeding times, and set a 50 m precautionary distance from nesting birds.

The Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) has alerted Australian tour operators to the guidelines and invited them to submit feedback on their experiences at these sites at the close of the 2005–06 season.

In 2004–05, an observer from the AAD (Warren Papworth) visited the Antarctic Peninsula to view tourism

in action. He travelled aboard the RV *Akademik Sergey Vavilov*, operated by Peregrine Adventures. Both ship and tour operations were found to meet all environmental requirements.

Other observations on this voyage and Antarctic tourism in general, were:

- Ship-based tourism provides excellent opportunities to educate visitors on environmental and safety issues. Passengers attend wide-ranging and informative lectures that guide their interactions with native flora and fauna.
- By keeping a high ratio of guides to tourists, operators minimise disturbance to sites. However, the cumulative impact of tourism activities is harder to assess. To better understand this, we may need more base-line data and more comprehensive monitoring programs.
- Tour operators seek to provide their customers with as broad a range of experiences as possible. The sites they visit have diverse natural features and environmental values. Some of these sites might be environmentally sensitive, such as when certain species of fauna are breeding or moulting, or there are particular floral assemblages. Site specific guidelines should help address the management of activities at such sites.

Beyond the Peninsula, the rest of the Antarctic continent, including the Ross Sea, received around 0.15 per cent of all tourists in 2004–05. No tourists visited the Australian Antarctic Territory last year, although two vessels are expected to visit Mawson's Huts and beyond in 2005–06.

For more information visit the website of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators: <<http://www.iaato.org>>.

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