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Report of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators 2023-24

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Under Article III (2) of the Antarctic Treaty

Introduction

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) is pleased to report its activities to ATCM 46.

IAATO focuses activities in support of its mission to advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel to Antarctica. Further information on IAATO, its mission, primary activities and recent developments can be found at:

www.iaato.org.

Overview

Over the last three decades, IAATO has been committed to the promotion of safe and environmentally responsible private sector travel. This commitment has been unwavering through periods of major growth, the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic and most recently, the emergence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Antarctica.

IAATO's strength has been and continues to be its membership's ability to draw upon their own experience and the advice from other stakeholders to address emerging challenges and evolve its procedures and management when necessary. IAATO's current membership totals 115 Members, comprised of 55 Operators and Provisional Operators and 60 Associates.

The total number of visitors in the 2023-24 season was 122,072 which was higher than the preliminary estimates provided at ATCM XLV. This was mainly the result of increased occupancy on the cruise only vessels travelling to Antarctica which accounted for 35% of the visitors.

The anticipated arrival of HPAI in Antarctica, particularly in the Antarctic Peninsula region was of high concern in advance of and during the 2023-24 season. The collaboration between IAATO, SCAR and COMNAP continued from the 2022-23 season and was further enhanced with additional communications and protocols. Internal communication between IAATO and its Operators continued to be strong during the season, which included increased reporting relating to HPAI (63 reports received on potential suspected cases) and the Site Stewardship Program (114 reports covering 27 sites), ATCM 46, IP 108 *IAATO Site Management Methods*.

Lessons learned and considerations for the upcoming season were discussed at IAATO's Annual Meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, USA (22-25 April 2024). Additionally, new guidelines were approved to further support visitor site management. Progress on IAATO's five-year strategic plan, *Embracing our Role as Stewards of Antarctica* (see attachment), was reviewed and short term goals for the upcoming season were approved to further support the plan. All of these steps are important to fulfill IAATO's mission, and to ensure Operators' activities have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the environment.

Further information on IAATO Operators' activities can be found in ATCM 46 IP102 *IAATO Vessel Overview of Antarctic Tourism: 2023-24 Season and Preliminary Estimates for 2024-25 Season*.

Further information on IAATO tourism statistics, including activities and nationalities, can be found in ATCM 46 IP104 *A Five-Year Overview and 2023-24 Season Report on IAATO*

Operator Use of Antarctic Peninsula Landing Sites and ATCM Visitor Site Guidelines and IP103 Deep Field and Air Overview of Antarctic Tourism: 2023-24 Season and Preliminary Estimates for 2024-25 Season. The Membership Directory can be found at www.iaato.org.

IAATO Annual Meeting

IAATO's 2024 Annual Meeting was held in Annapolis, Maryland, United States of America, 22-25 April 2024. IAATO was pleased to have attend the open sessions in Annapolis Treaty Party member representatives from Australia, Türkiye, United Kingdom and the United States of America as well as other valued stakeholders, including COMNAP and ASOC. Certain portions of this meeting were also live streamed for members and invited guests, which included representatives from the Netherlands, Peru and Uruguay.

Actions at the Annual Meeting included:

- Review of IAATO's five-year strategy, *Embracing Our Role as Stewards of Antarctica* and the status of the 2023-24 Short Term Actions and the approval of seven Short Term Actions for 2024-25, which include:
 - Developing a new Polar Guide application (ATCM 46 IP106 *Field Operations Manual*)
 - Incorporating the updated Antarctic Ambassador Program (ATCM 46 IP110 *Antarctic Ambassador Expedition Program*)
 - Evolving the Observer Program (ATCM 46 IP109 *IAATO Observer and Compliance Program*)
- Review of the 2023-24 season results of IAATO initiatives including:
 - Mandatory/Provisional Operator Observer Program (ATCM 46 IP109)
 - Voluntary Cetacean and Pinniped Sighting Program (ATCM 46 IP108)
 - Site Stewardship Program (ATCM 46 IP108)
- Adoption of several new guidelines and infrastructure changes including
 - 17 new IAATO Visitor Site Guidelines, which cover both terrestrial and marine locations (ATCM 46 IP108).
 - New Vessel Helicopter Activity Restricted Zones (ATCM 46 IP102)
 - Updated Compliance & Dispute Committee Rules of Procedure (ATCM 46 IP109)
- Creation of the Cruise Only Working Group. (IAATO now has 12 committees and 10 working groups.)
- Discussion at a Town Hall session and presentation in the open meeting regarding the impact of HPAI during the past season and considerations for the 2024-25 season

Treaty Party Representatives are cordially invited to join any of the open sessions during IAATO's future Annual Meetings. IAATO's 2025 Annual Meeting will be held in Cascais, Portugal, during the week of April 14, 2025.

IAATO Support of Research & Conservation

IAATO encourages collaborative opportunities with scientific organizations particularly where these enhance the Antarctic community's understanding of human activities in the region.

Projects include(d):

- HPAI Response – Prior to the start of the 2023-24 season, IAATO's collaboration with COMNAP and SCAR continued regarding the enhancement of protocols related to HPAI, which included considerations when working with scientists as well as a reporting process for suspected cases to SCAR. These were communicated to IAATO Operators in August

and October of 2023 through virtual Town Hall sessions and webinars and materials were developed to assist with the education of field staff and guests related to these protocols. See also ATCM 46 WP47 *Update on High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza in Antarctica* and ATCM 46 IP105 *IAATO Operator High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Response*.

- **HPAI Australis Expedition 2024** – In March of 2024, an international multidisciplinary team of wildlife biologists, veterinarians and virologists, led by Dr. Meagan Dewar, SCAR, went to Antarctica, specifically the Danger Islands and into the Weddell Sea. Leveraging suspected reports submitted by IAATO Operators during the season, Dr. Dewar collaborated with IAATO to determine appropriate sites to visit and conducted research regarding HPAI. IAATO was the primary funder of this expedition. (ATCM 46 IP105)
- **IAATO/COMNAP Fellowships** – IAATO, in collaboration with COMNAP, will continue to invest in the development of early-career researchers by awarding its sixth US\$15,000 Fellowship in 2024. Suitable candidates are encouraged to [apply](#). IAATO [recognized](#) two fellows in 2023: Leena Riekkola from the University of Auckland, New Zealand and, Miguel Ángel Bascur from the University of Barcelona, Spain.
- **Support in Antarctica** – IAATO Operator expeditions during the 2023-24 season were able to provide support for various scientific projects, such as the Antarctic Site Inventory - Oceanites and Penguin Watch. Many IAATO Operators also provided logistical field support by air, overland traverse or vessel to National Antarctic Programs.

Other Work and Activities

IAATO also continues to prioritize activities that strengthen its institutional structure and help position it as a reputable, valued partner in the wider polar community. In addition to the work described above, over the past year, IAATO has:

- Hosted 10 webinars, covering 20 topics, for field staff at the beginning and end of the 2023-24 season to discuss best practices and lessons learned. These webinars were recorded and made available for field staff who weren't able to attend the live session or wanted a refresher during the season. These webinars will become part of an education library available for field staff and Operators. This practice will continue for the 2024-25 season, as will a joint Polar Field Staff Conference with the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO), in September of 2024.
- Facilitated over 5,000 online assessments for field staff, crew (including captains and bridge officers) and office personnel which were successfully completed for the 2023-24 season.

In addition, IAATO Secretariat staff and Operator representatives participated in internal and external meetings, liaising with Treaty Party representatives, National Antarctic Program personnel, and governmental, scientific, environmental, and industry organizations, including but not limited to:

- **COMNAP Annual Meeting**, June 2023, and participation in **COMNAP Expert Groups**
- **COMNAP SAR Workshop**, June 2023, with participation on the steering committee
- **AECO Conference & Annual Meeting**, October 2023
- **Workshop “Workshop on Tourism Monitoring in Antarctica”**, 10-12 October 2023 (Online, Hosted by Germany)
- **AECO Joint Arctic SAR**, March 2024

Tourism Incidents 2023-24

IAATO's policy is to disclose major incidents to ensure risks are understood and appropriate lessons are learned for all Antarctic Operators. There were no major environmental or safety incidents during the 2023-24 season.

IAATO is committed to reviewing all incidents, and taking appropriate actions for updating operational procedures as needed.

With Thanks

IAATO appreciates the opportunity to work cooperatively with Antarctic Treaty Parties, COMNAP, SCAR, CCAMLR, IHO/HCA, WMO, ASOC and others toward the long-term protection of Antarctica.