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IAATO'S FORMALIZATION OF AN ACCREDITATION SCHEME AND INTERNAL AUDIT PROCESS AND THE ASSOCIATION'S VIEWS ON AN ATCM ACCREDITATION SCHEME

IAATO's Formalization of an Accreditation Scheme and Internal Audit Process and the Association's Views on an ATCM Accreditation Scheme

**Submitted by the
International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO)**

Introduction

Since ATCM XXVI, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) has undertaken work on the process of formalizing an accreditation scheme and internal audit processes. This work is elaborated upon here along with IAATO's views on an ATCM Accreditation Scheme for Non-governmental Activities in the Antarctic Treaty Area presently being considered by the ATCPs.

Steps Forward

Recognizing the continued growth of tourism to the Antarctic IAATO Members believe that the Association itself should further institute additional mechanisms for self-managing tourism. At their recently held General Meeting in Christchurch (April 27th – 30th, 2004) Members agreed to move ahead with the development of a formal Accreditation Scheme and Audit Procedure. This would effectively formalize IAATO's many guiding principles and operational standards and establish mechanisms to audit operators' compliance with them. Appendix A elaborates on the background of the commercial tourism industry and the steps that led IAATO Members to the development of an accreditation and auditing scheme.

IAATO Members are aware that an ATCM Accreditation Scheme for Non-Governmental Activities in the Antarctic Treaty Area is presently being considered by the Parties. At its meeting the Association considered the issue in depth following the discussion raised at the ATME in Norway on whether or not an accreditation and auditing scheme should be left to the Parties entirely, developed in tandem with IAATO's scheme or explored along another avenue.

With 13 years of tourism experience in the Antarctic, IAATO suggests that the option for it to be the administrator of a Party-developed Accreditation Scheme (to incorporate IAATO and non-IAATO operators) is worthy of further discussion should the Parties wish industry to take on this role.

IAATO Members envision a formal accreditation scheme that would enable operators to be assessed in order to verify their compliance with established standards and procedures. This scheme would be transparent to the operators, to the ATCPs and to the community at large. Through the use of a logo for accredited operators, it also provides concerned consumers with a choice and provides operator that meet best-practice performance with the incentive of public recognition.

The Accreditation Process – A Step by Step Approach

The accreditation process is a series of steps:

- Preparation, by the operator to be assessed, of application documentation that demonstrates that it satisfies, or intends to comply with, the defined criteria. These criteria comprise a suite of operating standards and procedures.
- Submission of this paperwork by the operator.
- Physical inspection to verify that the operator meets the defined criteria (e.g. the assessment process).
- Accreditation (achieved once the operator has met the required standards).

The checklist of defined operational criteria will be transparent and made available to governments or Treaty Parties as appropriate. It could be included on the Treaty's tourism database if so desired. IAATO promotes continuous improvement in its environmental and operating standards, and the accreditation criteria will be subject to regular review and development.

Accreditation criteria include compliance with standard operating procedures and agreement, for example, to submit Post Visit Site Reports. Examples of standard operational procedures include the submission of information on staff to passenger ratios and prior Antarctic experience of the staff team, Advance Notification, environmental impact assessment and permits (if required).

An important component of the accreditation process is an on-site inspection conducted by an accredited assessor.

IAATO's DRAFT Handbook Defining Operational Standards and Accreditation and Audit Procedures for Membership

Work has begun on an "IAATO Handbook Defining Operational Standards and Accreditation and Audit Procedures for Membership" (attached here as Appendix B) that sets out, *inter alia*:

- Objectives and the Antarctic Treaty System,
- Bylaws,
- Accreditation and Compliance,
- Operating Procedures and Standards,
- Emergency Procedures,
- Reporting,
- Cumulative Impacts,
- Relevant Legislation,
- EIA Processes,

- IAATO History,
- Member Director and Executive,
- List of Reference Documents

The scheme will elaborate:

- IAATO's audit processes (including its already-existing observer scheme),
- Systems and penalties for addressing infringements.

The document will be reviewed annually and updated as needed.

Observer Scheme

A component of an accreditation and auditing scheme is verification. IAATO already requires an IAATO-approved observer on a trip operated by a Provisional Member in order to be considered for Full Membership. Association Bylaws include a provision for putting membership applications on hold (e.g. retaining a Provisional Member for an additional year until standards are met) or demoting Members (e.g. from Full Member status to Probationary status) for breaches. The reporting by members of other members' breaches is useful, however with an accreditation and auditing scheme, a mechanism must be developed for charges to be validated to avoid infighting by competitors.

In order to ensure an effective and enforceable system, in fact and in the eyes of ATCPs, the Parties could implement an on-board observer scheme for tourist vessels, as a mechanism to be used sparingly should Parties develop their own scheme (or in tandem with IAATO's). An observer scheme managed by the ATCPs would enable verification as to whether or not operators are complying with the acknowledged procedures, laws and regulations, and provide a system whereby any significant infringements can be dealt with under relevant national legislation. The costs however would need to be on the government sponsoring the observer versus the operator in order to assure a non-biased report. IAATO also would strongly recommend that the observer have extensive Antarctic and preferably tourism experience in order to successfully evaluate the operation.

Conclusion:

IAATO Members have worked diligently over the last 13 years to self-regulate and manage tourism activities in Antarctica and will continue to do so, however as the Antarctic tourism industry increases in number and diversifies in its activities Members realize that the Association must adapt, change its operating strategies and find ways to further formalize management of the industry. IAATO will move ahead with its own Accreditation and Auditing Scheme and looks forward to discussions in Cape Town by the Parties in regard to this issue. IAATO would welcome the opportunity to be involved in further discussions as they occur.

APPENDIX A

Background of the Industry And the Steps Leading to Accreditation and Auditing

A group of seven experienced Antarctic tour operators to “advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible travel to the Antarctic” formed the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) in 1991. Thirteen years and 70 members later, this tenet continues to be the cornerstone of the Association and guides the operations of its members, which comprise at least 95% of the commercial tourism industry. Members are expected to work diligently to establish best practices in regards to their operations and it should be noted that the membership is made up of the world’s experts in polar travel who remain committed to environmentally conscious tourism to the Antarctic.

Today IAATO represents nearly all ship and land-based and air over-flight operators. Alone neither one or two tour operators or a single government have the ability to develop a sufficient strategy to effectively deal with a range of diversified forms of tourism but collectively -- along with a cooperative relationship with the ATCP’s -- IAATO is committed to further develop a frame of reference for the responsible and sustainable development of Antarctic tourism.

IAATO has developed and implemented best-practice activity guidelines, responsible codes of conduct, contingency plans and a suite of strategies to minimize any potential impacts from members’ activities in the Antarctic. As the membership has increased and activities diversified so has the need for IAATO to further institute additional mechanisms for the self-management of tourism.

For the last 30 or so years, tour operators have conducted a wide-range of tourism activities utilizing vessels ranging from small sailing vessels (yachts), non-ice strengthened vessels (e.g. large cruise ships), ice-strengthened vessels and icebreakers, fixed-winged aircraft, helicopter and land-based operations. Kayaking, climbing, skiing, scuba diving and camping have all become the travel norm by IAATO Members for at least the last 13 years.

During the 1980’s existing operators developed Visitor and Tour Operator Codes of Conduct. With the formation of IAATO in 1991 operators further agreed to formally adopt the Visitor and Tour Operator Guidelines, along with Association Bylaws. From this came Guidelines, which were later adopted by the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCPs), with slight modification, as Recommendation XVIII-1 (“Guidance for Visitors to the Antarctic” and “Guidance for Those Organising and Conducting Tourism and Non-Governmental Activities in the Antarctic”) (ATCM XVIII). Although they are “simply” guidelines they have been one of the many management tools that have successfully worked to mitigate environmental impacts in Antarctica. In addition parties agreed to adopt standard forms for Advance Notification and Post Visit Site Reporting for Non-Governmental Activities in Antarctica (ATCM XXI, Resolutions 1 and 3). Although these are Treaty-adopted forms, several Parties do not require or share this information with those organizing voyages and so the challenge

of coordinating activities between operators falls strictly on IAATO. This challenge is difficult, especially when dealing with non-IAATO operators.

However, Visitor and Tour Operator Guidelines weren't enough and IAATO felt compelled to continue to design, develop and implement as needed industry 'best practices,' including additional activity guidelines, site guidelines and equally important numerous comprehensive standard operational procedures and protocols. Many of these guidelines, procedures and protocols have been presented in previous ATCM papers by IAATO. Those procedures include:

Vessel Operations

- No more than one ship at one place at one time,
- Ships carrying 500+ passengers should be cruise only (and not land),
- Appropriate itineraries for appropriate vessels. For example, vessels without ice-strengthening or double hulls should sail in relatively ice free waters, avoid restricted passages or enter into areas such as Antarctic Sound,
- Comprehensive Vessel Call Data Sheet provided to each Member in advance of the season, including non members,
- Comprehensive detailed day-to-day ship schedules issued during July and then carefully analyzed to avoid landing site conflicts in advance of the season,
- Hiring of an experienced staff team comprised of individuals with at least 75% previous Antarctic experience,
- Regular communication with IAATO vessels, vessels operated by non-IAATO companies and/or national program ships.

Landing Operations

- No more than 100 tourists (excluding expedition staff) are allowed ashore at one time at one site, and
- Strict adherence to Activity Guidelines and Site Specific Guidelines (with stringent limitations based on site sensitivities and size of operation).

Land-Based Operations-Established by Adventure Network International

- Consistent use of a checklist based on the proposed activity,
- Effective screening of prospective clients well in advance of the season,
- Effective coordination amongst all players, including IAATO members,
- Adherence to a Search and Rescue Plan appropriate to the activity, including having the adequate insurance in place.

Members have filed appropriate environmental impact assessments on their operations, and implemented an effective in-house accrediting system to validate IAATO's position, alleviate concerns, and reduce some Parties' preference for externally imposed regulation. Procedures and standards are reviewed annually and revised as necessary prior to the next operating season.

APPENDIX B

DRAFT IAATO HANDBOOK DEFINING OPERATIONAL STANDARDS AND ACCREDITATION AND AUDIT PROCEDURES FOR MEMBERSHIP

PARTIAL LIST OF CONTENTS

(April 2004-to be elaborated on)

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IAATO Membership Directory and Executive

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