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An Update on IAATO's Accreditation and Audit Scheme

An Update on IAATO's Accreditation and Audit Scheme

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

Further to ATCM XXVII, IP 69 (**IAATO's Formalization Of An Accreditation Scheme And Internal Audit Process And The Association's Views On An ATCM Accreditation Scheme**), the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) has undertaken additional comprehensive work on the development of an Antarctic Operator Accreditation and Audit Scheme. The purpose of this scheme is to:

- address the growth of tourism within IAATO and in Antarctica in general,
- formalize IAATO's existing guiding principles,
- establish formal compliance mechanisms to audit tour operators,
- ensure best practices and standards within the tourism industry and,
- ensure that the responsibility of self-regulation is an effective management tool.

This paper is a short summary of the draft accreditation scheme presented to IAATO Members at the 16th Annual General Meeting, May 2-5, 2005.

It is important to note that the IAATO Bylaws and operating procedures are an essential part of this process. The draft scheme was developed for IAATO member companies and formalizes existing practices and membership requirements.

Background

Discussion on accreditation began in 1991 when IAATO was formed, and included in the IAATO Bylaws, as follows:

IAATO Bylaws: Article III Section K. (1991)

To ensure that the best qualified staff and field personnel are employed by IAATO members through continued training and education; and to encourage and develop international acceptance of evaluation, certification and accreditation programs for Antarctic personnel. IAATO expects its members to hire a staff team comprising individuals with at least 75% previous Antarctic experience.

IAATO Membership subsequently began developing working tools to actually consider further development of an accreditation and/or certification scheme. Accreditation is not a new approach, but conforms with IAATO's initial intent when the Association was formed.

Since 1991, IAATO has strived to put these operating procedures in place, write appropriate guidelines, and create a forum to host these materials so that members have access to the procedures, understand expectations, can implement such a process and test it over a lengthy period of time. Since the Antarctic poses both political and operational challenges coupled with the unique nuances of Antarctic tourism there were few models available to provide enough infrastructures to use an existing scheme. IAATO has had to tailor its focus to protect and conserve Antarctica yet be practical and operationally feasible for operators to be able to implement such a scheme. There are accreditation programs in existence around the world, each with its own implementation.

Accreditation was further discussed at IAATO's 15th Annual General Meeting (hereafter AGM) in Christchurch, in April 2004 and also at the 16th AGM in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2005. At both meetings participants discussed the process within the IAATO Member-only sessions and in the open forum where it was valuable to have a wider discussion. Plenary, small group and panel discussions involving participants representing IAATO members, government, conservation groups and university faculty occurred during both AGM's and were a valuable tool in gaining input into the process.

It was agreed at the 16th AGM that for the 2005-2006 season 15 IAATO Member Companies organizing in Australia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States have voluntarily agreed to trial test this process.

IAATO's Accreditation Process and Documentation

All documents for this scheme will be housed on the IAATO website for easy access. IAATO's accreditation process consists of a series of documents that include the following outline:

A. The Process

The Accreditation Process consists of detailed descriptions of the actual working process, the chronological time frame, requirements for application, and the interaction between IAATO, the operator and the accreditation board. The process will be transparent in nature and allow for input by various stakeholders.

B. Checklist of Operational Criteria and Best Practice Standards

The checklist includes the following:

1. Objectives and Membership Principles
2. Standard Operating Procedures
3. Guidelines
4. Sub Antarctic Islands where appropriate (e.g. permits, management plans etc.)
5. Reporting Procedures
6. Reference Documents
7. Operations Manuals
8. Government Authorizations and Permits
9. Miscellaneous

C. Application for Membership and Provisional Accreditation

This form outlines the overall application process for members applying for Provisional and Full Accreditation

1. Introduction
2. Required Documents
3. Application Process
4. Cost of Membership
5. Cost of Accreditation
6. Invoices
7. Observer
8. Domestic Legislation

D. Observer Report Form for Ship-Based Activities

The report form includes the following:

1. Introduction

2. Voyage Overview
3. Actual Itinerary Traveled
4. General Conduct of Tour Operator
5. Compliance with Approvals and Permits
6. Compliance with Management Plans
7. Compliance with Operator's Advance Notification and EIA
8. Expedition Leader and Staff
9. Passenger and Crew Briefings
10. Pre-Landing Action
11. Shore Inspection
12. Management Approach
13. Landing Restrictions
14. Boot Washing and Steps to Prevent Disease Transmission and Translocation of Organisms
15. Activities Ashore
16. Safety Planning
17. Vessel Operation
18. Zodiac or other Landing Craft Operations
19. Other Activities
20. Historic Sites and Monuments
21. Research Stations
22. Sub Antarctic Islands where appropriate
23. Other Observations and Recommendations

Eligibility

Organizers who are current IAATO Members or new companies applying for membership that operate their own travel programs, file appropriate paperwork with their national authorities, hire their own expedition leaders and staff can apply to become accredited. IAATO has no legal jurisdiction over operators, however if an operator wants to remain a member of IAATO they are expected to comply with IAATO's accreditation process.

Accreditation Committee

An Accreditation Committee was formed at the 15th and 16th AGM and, together with the Executive and Finance Committees, the draft Accreditation Scheme will be analyzed further. Member's trial testing this process during the 2005-06 season will be asked to provide input into the process at the 17th AGM. Since this is a complex process gaps were further identified at the 16th AGM and will be addressed during the upcoming year by the Accreditation Committee.

Accreditation Board

The Accreditation Board will be formed and could consist of IAATO representatives, company representatives, outside sources from government, science, university faculty, and others with appropriate expertise.

Future Tasks

The following tasks are scheduled for further development during the 2005-2006 season in order to further solidify this process:

1. Create terms of reference and identify potential participants on the Accreditation Board.
2. Consider ways to accredit Land-Based Operators, Air Over-flights, and Sailing Vessels.
3. Consider how to address one-off expeditions that are transported through an accredited member where the members own accreditation would not cover the one-off expedition.
4. Address the possibility of how non-IAATO Members companies and other non-governmental activities can be accredited through the proposed IAATO scheme.
5. Establish a formal mechanism for an end-of-the-Antarctic season/trip review and evaluation of the Accreditation and Audit Scheme.
6. Finalize the IAATO Accreditation Logo.
7. Review the trial process at the 17th AGM in May 2006 and consider changes as necessary, based on experience during the trial test.

IAATO welcomes comments from Antarctic Treaty Parties in order to improve the management of this scheme, with correspondence to iaato@iaato.org, Attn. Denise Landau, Executive Director.