



## ANTARCTIC TREATY CONSULTATIVE MEETING 2006

IP 95

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### **An Update on the Antarctic Audit and Accreditation Scheme**



# An Update on the Antarctic Audit and Accreditation Scheme

## Information Paper submitted by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO)

### Introduction

At ATCM XXVIII the United Kingdom introduced a Working Paper, ATCM XXVIII WP18 *Report of the Intersessional Contact Group (ICG) on Accreditation Scheme for Antarctic Tour Operators*. IAATO presented IP96, *An Update on IAATO's Accreditation and Audit Scheme*, in which progress was outlined on the development of an accreditation scheme for Antarctic Tourism.

As noted in WP 18, ICG made progress but was unable to reach agreement on several issues, including whether an accreditation scheme should be voluntary or compulsory or even whether existing procedures could be used. As a result, IAATO was invited to continue work on the accreditation issue and to keep interested delegations informed of progress. Further progress on accreditation is thus presented to ATCM XXIX, identifying current work, goals, gaps and issues in the development process.

The steady increase over the past 15 years in the number of tourist ships and aircraft visiting Antarctica has been noted elsewhere (see ATCM XXIX IP86, *IAATO Overview of Antarctic Tourism 2005-2006*, and in previous overview papers submitted to ATCM). Although current levels of tourism do not present significant management or environmental impact issues it is likely that the tourism industry will continue to increase and therefore strategies for effective management should be adopted through a formal accreditation process to ensure continued protection of the Antarctic environment.

While a simple accreditation scheme will not solve all tourism issues, nor provide a “quick” fix to the growth of tourism, IAATO agrees that such a scheme has great potential provided that it takes into consideration a wide range of tools and procedures.

### IAATO's Current Practices

Members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) are regulated by following a set of self-imposed guidelines and comprehensive conservation strategies for the management of tourism in Antarctica. IAATO's Bylaws and practices have evolved as a result of IAATO members' dedication to preserving Antarctica, and in response to procedures agreed at Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCM).

These guidelines and strategies are a synthesis of techniques developed and implemented by IAATO during the past 15 years. IAATO's management of tourism has proved to be effective and there is no immediate need to integrate a new program until a complete risk analysis and regulatory framework is identified. Current IAATO procedures are already a form of audit and accreditation, for example through an independent observer program and verification of environmental documentation. As an organization IAATO fully agrees with the merits of working toward a more formalized global approach.

There are, however, three forms of tourism that fall outside IAATO: 1) non-IAATO members from Contracting States that operate without comparable audit procedures or management strategies; 2) non-IAATO operators organized in countries outside the Antarctic Treaty Parties; 3) government-supported tourism, a form that has increased in volume and diversity in recent years.

As nearly all Antarctic Tour operators are current members of IAATO, IAATO's management strategies have functioned as an effective audit process in the absence of any legal or formal audit or accreditation requirements. For this new scheme to work, it must be applied across the board to all forms of Antarctic tourism, and inevitably this will require an incentive for all operators to want to be accredited: marketing alone will not be a sufficient incentive.

### Workshops and Discussions

IAATO convened an Accreditation Workshop in New York City on September 9, 2005, which was attended by representatives from Australia, United Kingdom and various IAATO member companies.

After a series of presentations, the Accreditation Workshop discussed a principle-based tourism management accreditation system for Antarctic tour operators. Amongst several proposals, one idea was that it could be modelled after the ISO 14001 Environmental System Standards in combination with IAATO's already established procedures. IAATO's objectives have always been principle-based and an important first step was perceived to be a clear redefinition of these principles. Much of the progress made by IAATO subsequent to this meeting has been to crystallise the principles behind such a system and to establish the basics of the process.

In addition, IAATO engaged several accreditation specialists and consultants throughout the year. The consultants were asked to look at the breadth and scope of IAATO management strategies and identify gaps, strengths and weaknesses of the proposed program.

As a result of several meetings and consultations throughout the year, a preliminary draft paper of the Accreditation Scheme was provided to all participants of IAATO's 17<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting. An updated draft of the overall "operational" document for ship-based operators was agreed in principle and a formal Accreditation Committee was appointed. Members agreed that the Accreditation Committee and consultants will need to examine mechanisms to close obvious gaps. Land-based operations would be addressed subsequently.

IAATO's Accreditation Committee was tasked to undertake further work and present an updated version of the scheme to the membership and all participants at the 18th Annual General Meeting in Hobart, Australia (June 2007). If the membership adopts the draft scheme a trial test would most likely be put in place for the subsequent operating season. IAATO has scheduled several meetings to progress on this issue during the next year.

### **Overall Accreditation Concepts**

IAATO's step-by-step progress toward a formal accreditation scheme for Antarctic tourism has been guided by the following objectives:

- That it is a formal and mandatory procedure that is independent, verifiable and has "teeth";
- That the accreditation scheme would not replace the important role of domestic legislation;
- That it has as its basis adopted Antarctic Treaty System agreements and IAATO principles. However, as principles alone are not enough, the accreditation system must incorporate necessary operational procedures that allow for implementation of the overarching agreements.
- That it does not duplicate or conflict with current international maritime or aviation agreements;
- That it reflects a clear application of agreed standards that can be regularly monitored;
- That it is a simple, transparent and effective procedure that avoids unnecessary duplication of paperwork;
- That it does not impose undue costs or bureaucracy on governments and operators;
- That it can be applied to all forms of Antarctic tourism;
- That it is an efficient procedure that can react quickly to changing tourism activities giving useful and timely output to permitting / authorising agencies;
- That it is clearly independent and managed by a well rounded board or team of experienced and dedicated professionals;
- That the process does not attach any liability to the accreditation or permitting agency;
- That it requires tour operators commit to the following core principles:
  - 1) To abide by best practices that advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible travel to the Antarctic;
  - 2) To subscribe to the principle that their planned activities will have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment, and to provide evidence that effective measures are in place to ensure adherence to this principle;

- 3) To operate within the parameters of and comply fully with the Antarctic Treaty System and relevant domestic legislation;
- 4) To demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement of their Antarctic operations.

### **Current Identifiable Challenges and Issues in the Audit and Accreditation Scheme**

Ownership and running of the scheme is one of the most complicated and difficult challenges. It is imperative that all interested stakeholders work towards ensuring that the process transcends both industry and political biases, and be a neutral, effective programme. IAATO is keen to continue to work with Treaty Parties towards this goal, and welcomes the similar approach which has been demonstrated to date by Parties.

IAATO considers it critical that the organization takes a leading role in the scheme as the administrator and acknowledges the merit of formalising this process through an independent auditor. For Treaty Parties, the challenge will be to set in place an appropriate and a timely application of an accreditation process that is consistent between Parties and thus between operators.

During various accreditation discussions other key issues were raised that have not yet been clearly resolved:

- What persons or body will undertake accreditation? Given that this is a complex, and far-reaching scheme that addresses maritime and aviation operations, domestic legislation, environmental management programs and operational requirements, the persons or body will need to encompass a whole range of skills as well as appropriate Antarctic experience.
- How will existing national government-based permit / authorisation processes interact with an accreditation system and how will information be exchanged between the various stakeholders?
- The most effective, and least cumbersome, way to bring the present or future ATS Measures and Resolutions into the scheme as part of a principle-based design. In addition the scheme will need to incorporate the successful and well-tested operational procedures which currently lie within IAATO's management regime. Critical to the success of a principle-based system of safe and responsible management of Antarctic tourism is having sound operational procedures in place.
- Industry wide reporting of tourism activities. Currently, only IAATO has an interactive and dynamic exchange of information that allows for the monitoring of tourism activities but does not, at present, have full access to all available information.
- The accreditation process will need to provide timely output to the relevant government agencies concerned with the granting of authority or permits so that each of those agencies is able to follow procedures that are common and acceptable to each of the Treaty Parties' jurisdictions. A mechanism needs to be devised to ensure compatibility amongst the relevant Parties.
- How will the long-term funding and information management be handled?
- The roles of the Observers, Board, Auditor, and Administrator need to be defined along with the costs associated with a new structure.

### **Adoption and Implementation: A Way Forward**

Despite these gaps and challenges, IAATO remains fully committed to carefully addressing the overall strategy. Currently the following proposed points are being taken into consideration in the design of an audit and accreditation scheme:

- 1) The existing IAATO management and operational procedures are formalised.
- 2) IAATO as the administrator registers with an external accreditation agency and appoints an independent auditor under the guidance of a Board.
- 3) Create an independent board and formalize the organisational structure. (See Appendix A)
- 4) Operators wishing to work in Antarctica must go through the audit process so that an assessment can be made by June of each year. An Accreditation Board is fundamental at this stage in order to approve audit criteria (See Appendix A).

- 5) The result of the audit is passed to the relevant national agency by July of each year. These agencies can use the results of the audit process during their consideration of individual company submissions for permits or authority to visit Antarctica.

## Appendix A Draft Organisational Flow

