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## Barrientos Island Footpath Erosion



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## Information Paper submitted by IAATO

### **Introduction**

At CEP XV, Ecuador and Spain presented *WP059 Revised Visited Site Guidelines: Aitcho Islands*, which included some disturbing photographs of erosion in moss beds on Barrientos Island in the Aitcho Island group. In a statement made at CEP XV, IAATO noted that the footpath erosion in vegetation at Barrientos Island was a sobering reminder of the need to be vigilant and raised a number of issues for the Association. In addition, IAATO noted that its operators would voluntarily place a moratorium on the walk, and committed to investigate the matter internally and report back to CEP XV. This paper highlights the relevant aspects of this internal investigation.

### **IAATO's Response**

In order to investigate and address these issues, IAATO launched two initiatives:

1. A questionnaire was sent out to all IAATO operators requesting information regarding adherence to guidelines on Barrientos Island specifically and to Visitor Site Guidelines in general; the understanding of the level of impacts; and the effectiveness of communication between field staff, their head offices and the IAATO secretariat on such issues. There were responses from over 20 Expedition Leaders (ELs) and operators.
2. Interviews were held with 14 ELs while in gateway ports and a further 12 ELs in the field during the 2012-13 season. During these discussions feedback on a number of issues was requested including on Visitor Site Guidelines in general and Barrientos in particular.

Both the questionnaires and interviews were done in confidence to ensure that answers and feedback were given in a safe, trusted environment.

Additionally, targeted communication efforts were undertaken to ensure that the seasonal closure was widely understood and to raise discussion about the issue amongst field staff. This was done through the usual channels (the IAATO Field Operations Manual, Seasonal Updates, Online Assessment) and also through the advent of a new initiative, an IAATO Field Staff Newsletter, which was issued three times during the season.

### **Feedback**

Feedback from field staff highlighted a number of issues for consideration by IAATO. Those felt to be of particular interest to CEP are highlighted below:

#### ***Visitor Site Guidelines:***

*General Comments* - From the responses to the questionnaire all respondents noted that they knew the guidelines and read them at the beginning of the season and/or before each visit to the site. There was general consensus that the Visitor Site Guidelines were a useful tool for visitor management. It was noted that in some cases actual management of groups had to be stricter than indicated in the Visitor Site Guidelines, either because of the group or because of environmental features (snow state, seal haul-out, etc.).

*Useability* - Most noted that the Visitor Site Guidelines in general were easy to understand and in the case of Barrientos Island, they believed they had understood the route that needed to be taken. However there was at least one case where an EL thought he had taken the correct route, but on assessing photographs provided from the walk, it proved to be the incorrect route. There were other comments that the Barrientos Visitor Site Guidelines did not adequately show the route, as the route was only indicated in a thumbnail picture of the whole island, and the photographs were potentially misleading.

*Interpretation* - Three ELs deliberately chose to take the old route. One noted that this was taken on the advice of the Ecuadorian researchers. The other two ELs selected to follow the old route because it was drier and “*would cause less impact*” with one stating that for much of the season “*on this higher ground there was deep snow/ice cover so it was possible to walk without damaging the moss beds*”.

*Reporting of impacts* - In trying to understand why the damage had not been reported direct to IAATO or the Operators from the ELs, the responses to the questions indicated that the vast majority of the respondents did not see the extent of the erosion indicated in the photographs shown by the Ecuadorian researchers. Several noted, that had they, they would have strongly rejected it as being unacceptable. Two ELs noted that the path had become more worn during the season, but reiterated that they had not seen damage to the extent photographed.

### **Next Steps**

Many issues came out of the survey and interviews, which IAATO will be considering in various forums. Discussions at IAATO25 highlighted in particular the following points:

- IAATO’s Membership will continue to prohibit walks through Closed Area B on Barrientos Island until additional information is available.
- In general Visitor Site Guidelines are perceived as very beneficial and are well used and understood, however the Barrientos example illustrates that where more precise management practices are being promoted, there is a need for more detailed information.
- IAATO will review options to strengthen feedback from Field Staff, for example, in addition to the “red flag mechanism” to alert IAATO to issues IAATO considers asking ELs and field staff to check defined conditions at specific landing sites and report back on a regular basis as to whether there is any change during the season.
- Efforts to improve the communication with, and the certification and accreditation of, field staff needs to continue as a high priority item for IAATO.

ATCMXXXVI and CEPXVI are invited to consider these conclusions.