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IAATO Procedures Upon the Discovery of a High Mortality Event

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

Summary

In order to support the CEPs on going work on non-native species manual, this Information Paper shares the high mortality procedures IAATO has had in place since 2007 as well as giving an overview of a recent instance when the procedures were exercised.

Introduction

IAATO has had procedures in place for nearly ten years to guide field staff on the discovery of a high mortality event. During recent discussions during the intersessional contact group on the non-native species manual, it was noted by some Parties that there would be value in having IAATO's guidelines publically available.

This Information Paper shares the procedures IAATO has in place as well as giving an overview of a recent instance when the procedures were exercised during last season.

Field Test During the 2015-2016 Season

To date, there have only been a few instances during visits to sub-Antarctic islands where high mortality procedures have had to be implemented. However, during the 2015-2016 season the procedures were set in motion following the report of a suspected high mortality event in the Antarctic Peninsula.

On 27th February 2016 an IAATO vessel informed IAATO that there was an apparent higher than normal level of mortality amongst gentoo penguin chicks at Cuverville Island, Antarctic Peninsula.

Immediately following the report, the IAATO fleet were sent a high alert noting the report and requesting information as to whether similar levels of mortality had been observed by others at Cuverville or at different locations. Initial reports suggested there was a high level of mortality at sites on the Eastern and Western side of the Peninsula, but not supporting the level of mortality initially reported at Cuverville Island.

Chilean, Argentine, British and USA Antarctic programs were notified, and until more facts were obtained from the field IAATO vessels changed their schedules to avoid landing at Cuverville Island and the need to ensure rigorous biosecurity measures was reinforced.

Field teams sent in reports from each visit to penguin colonies in the Peninsula over the following week. This information, combined with the advice and observations from scientists from several of the above National Antarctic Program concluded that it was most likely that any high mortality levels in chicks was caused by seasonal variations (such as levels of krill abundance and the particular high snow levels at the start of the season).

The actions and reporting between IAATO Members, field staff, IAATO office and National Antarctic Program scientists demonstrated the high level of cooperation in the field between both the tourism and the research community and ensured a swift reaction to any potential threats.

Appendix A:**IAATO Procedures Upon the Discovery of a High Mortality Event**

(updated 2009)

Background:

The code of practice for reporting and responding to a potentially high wildlife mortality event requires swift dissemination of observed and recorded information, in order to assist in preventing contamination between sites and contribute valuable information to the analysis and containment of a potential threat to the wildlife.

A high mortality event can be defined as an incident of unusually high mortality, or illness, in birds or other animals in relation to the population size in the area concerned. A number of factors may be responsible for the event, including infectious diseases, poisoning, exceptionally adverse weather conditions, changing sea ice conditions, heavy predation or critical food shortages. As an example in the recent past, incidents of avian cholera have been observed in penguin colonies, resulting in high mortality.

The precise definition of a high mortality event, and its cause, is open to interpretation. For example, in areas *outside* of high concentrations of wildlife, ten or more dead birds or animals in the same location at the same time could constitute a high mortality event¹. In areas of high concentrations of wildlife, other factors, such as the normal chick survival rate, as generally known for the species, would need to be taken into account. Diseased birds or animals may display behaviours such as staggering, falling, paralysis, inability to rise or disinclination to move when approached. Coughing, sneezing, excessive nasal discharge, ocular discharge, apparent blindness, diarrhoea or bloody or fetid faeces can also be indicators of disease. Ultimately, it will be experience of what is normal for that species in that location that will dictate whether the incident can be perceived as a high mortality event or not.

However, any highly unusual event, whether indisputable or perceived, should be noted and reported immediately.

Procedures on discovery of a high mortality event:

In the event of discovering a potentially high mortality event, tour operators should perform the following steps:

- Where the operator has reason to believe that landing passengers could lead to significant environmental impact to wildlife or the translocation of disease or may otherwise be ill-advised, the landing should be aborted.
- Do not walk among sick or dead animals.
- Do not collect samples or handle sick or dead animals
- Ensure standard boot and clothing decontamination procedures are thorough and completed for all clothing worn and any equipment used.
- *Immediately* report the event to IAATO, the nearest scientific station and ships operating in the area, including the information requested below.
- Notify the national authority from which the tour organizer received advance notification, of the incident.

¹ As defined by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Information required for high mortality event report:

- 1) Date:
- 2) Time in GMT:
- 3) Location, including name and co-ordinates (use GPS if possible):
- 4) Name of observer and vessel:
- 5) Species, noting whether adults or chicks/pups affected:
- 6) Number of individuals dead or dying and an estimated percentage of colony:
- 7) The surface area they covered:
- 8) Descriptions of any distinctive markings, or not, on the carcasses, or of any symptoms shown by dying animals:
- 9) Reference to recent extreme weather conditions (if any) or any other environmental or human disturbance factors that may potentially be linked to the event:
- 10) Include as many photographic and video records as possible:
- 11) Any other observations that could be relevant.