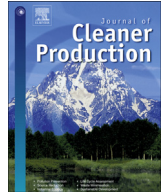




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## Contrasting views on Antarctic tourism: ‘last chance tourism’ or ‘ambassadorship’ in the last of the wild

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### ABSTRACT

Some of the suggested critical issues for Antarctic tourism include the role played by tourists as the last chance to see the icecaps before they melt, or represent potential ‘ambassadors’ within IAATO’s (International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators) scope for self-regulation. The study also addresses the question of whether ‘ambassadorship’ evolves in practice from ‘last chance tourism’ and how it evolves. The article urges Antarctic tourism stakeholders to maintain the integrity of the ecosystem while delivering social and economic value.

We carried out in-depth interviews of stakeholders and in situ interviews of tourists visiting Antarctica, in order to explore their perceptions from an interdisciplinary perspective based on management and biology. A study of tourist and stakeholder opinions and a combination of the two methods provided a wide perspective on the ‘ambassadorship’ concept.

Our findings reveal that the spontaneous trust characterising ambassadorship is far removed from the perception of tour operators. While a trip to Antarctica modifies the opinions of tourists, such changes in perspective are not always favourable to ecological practices. The ambassadorship role played by tourists visiting Antarctica is unclear. This is an exploratory study that develops the debate on whether tourists should be ambassadors for the Antarctic and points to the need for self-regulation to improve stakeholder engagement in protecting the continent. We suggest that a combination of new agreements for the protection of the territory, better planning, the use of management tools, and an improvement in some educational aspects of tourism may help protect Antarctica.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism generates intense debate and controversy; paraphrasing Tej Vir Singh (2012): “If I were to name, in one word, what is the best and worst thing in the world, my unequivocal answer would be tourism. Made up of strong paradoxes, it offers experiences that are magnificent, spectacular, languorous, horrific, good, bad and ugly — it’s an experience industry”. Tourism in Antarctica exemplifies this ongoing controversy and several years ago one of the experts in the

field wondered: “Does tourism help or hinder the future of the Polar Regions?” (Hall, 2010).

Antarctic tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although visits to the continent began over a century ago, it has only been easily practical to visit since the 1960s (Headland, 1994). It remains a small market with some 30,000 tourists a year (Hall, 2010). However, numbers are growing steadily (Lamers and Amelung, 2007; Hall and Saarinen, 2010; Powell et al., 2011) and this is likely to continue, despite the impact of the recession and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) resolution within the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution From Ships (MARPOL) banning the use of heavy fuel on ships in the Antarctic Treaty area (ATCM, 2012). The net effect of these factors was a fall in numbers during the 2011–2012 austral summer (26,509 visitors compared with 47,225 in 2006–2007). The drop was mainly

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attributable to large passenger ships (>500 passengers) leaving the Antarctic market. Tourism grew by 8%, from 34,316 tourists in 2012–2013 to 37,405 in 2013–2014 across the various categories (total number of tourists travelling with IAATO operators to Antarctica).

The growth in Antarctic tourism over the last two decades has driven diversification in products and segments (Haase et al., 2009). The industry has grown on products based on *pristine wilderness, unique and undisturbed wildlife, and dramatic landscapes* – all drawing on *last chance tourism* as a selling point (Smith, 2008). Last chance tourism best sums up the reasons for making the trip – a chance to see the Antarctic before the icecaps melt. Antarctica is the last terrestrial wilderness, the ‘last of the Wild’ (CIESIN, 2002), with a unique landscape and fauna. The marketing campaign for *M/V Sea Explorer* speaks of “the abundant wildlife and spectacular scenery of the Antarctic Peninsula.” Such ‘last chance tourism’ is driven by an urge to witness vanishing landscapes/seascapes and species and the need to understand why these natural wonders must be protected for their own sake and the good of mankind. These desires may have far-reaching consequences for tourism management. The paradox is that tourists want to see pristine nature before it vanishes, but by arriving in the ‘wilderness’ in large numbers they could be speeding its disappearance.

It has been claimed that eco-tourism positively changes the attitudes of tourists (Eijgelaar et al., 2010) and there is even talk of tourists undergoing ethical and environmental transformations (Weaver, 2005) that result in a long-term commitment to conservation (Zeppel and Muloin, 2008). This could be true in the case of Antarctic tourism. Snyder (2007) argues that the main benefit of such tourism is educational: “This can be used to not only turn visitors into ‘ambassadors’ for the protection of the visited regions but also into supporters of conservation activities and organizations worldwide,” (Snyder, 2007).

This positive effect is known as ‘ambassadorship’ and was coined by Lars-Eric Linbald in his Antarctic tourism trips. His idea has been reflected in IAATO’s Annual Meeting and Seasonal Statistic 2013 objectives: “Through self-regulation, Antarctic tourism is a sustainable, safe activity that causes no more than a minor or transitory impact on the environment and creates a corps of ambassadors for the continued protection of Antarctica by offering the opportunity to experience the continent first hand”. ‘Ambassadorship’ understood as ‘advocacy’ was defined by Maher et al. (2003) as pressing for “the preservation of the continent [by] those who have been to ‘The Ice’ and so have a first-hand experience of the values to protect”. However, there is little research on whether tourists returning from Antarctica act as ‘ambassadors’ merely by virtue of having been there. How can one make tourists act as ambassadors supporting the conservation of the natural world instead of mere *voyeurs* scrambling to get a last peep at a vanishing paradise?

This study focussed on the concepts of ‘ambassadorship’ and ‘last chance tourism’ in studying how tourists and tour operators see their own roles in eco-tourism in Antarctica, and also studies whether tourists gain knowledge about Antarctic wildlife and the functional aspects of this pristine environment. The main aim of this paper is to analyse stakeholder (tourist and tour operator) perceptions to investigate if the assertion that tourists can become ambassadors for the protection of the Antarctic continent after visiting is evident, and if not, how we should avoid more impacts created by greater demand.

The paper explores how these two contrasting views, ‘last chance tourism’ and ‘ambassadorship’, evolve in practice and suggests greater responsibility by all tourism stakeholders in maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem while delivering social and economic value, and also providing knowledge about the wildlife

and its conservation needs. These aspects are crucial in the case of eco-tourism when visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, and when intended as a low-impact and often small-scale alternative to mass tourism. The purpose of eco-tourism may include educating the traveller and providing funds for ecological conservation (Honey, 2008).

The paper distinguishes between the roles of tourists and tour operators in views about the future of Antarctica. Are tourists aware of this future? Are tourists sufficiently informed about the structure and functioning of this continent? Can tour operators be considered protectors of the continent or just users? Should education be part of their mission and role?

We carried out in-depth interviews of stakeholders and in situ interviews of tourists visiting Antarctica, in order to explore their perceptions from an interdisciplinary perspective based on management and biology. Our findings reveal that the spontaneous trust characterizing ambassadorship is far removed from the perception of tour operators. While a trip to Antarctica modifies the opinions of tourists, such changes in perspective are not always favourable to ecological practices. The ambassadorship role played by tourist visiting Antarctica is unclear.

This paper is structured as follows: (i) a short review of the most relevant literature on Antarctic tourism frames the research focus; (ii) the objectives and methodology used in the fieldwork are discussed; (iii) results of interviews and questionnaires are presented; and (iv) reflections and conclusions are offered together with suggested future lines of research.

## 2. Antarctic tourism research

Antarctic tourism has generated a significant volume of research. There are several compilations of studies defining polar tourism, its nature, and effects (Hall, 2010; Lamers et al., 2012). We highlight two large research fields, the first covering the management and regulation of Antarctic tourism, and the second dealing with tourist attitudes.

One of the points this research focuses on is the impact of continuous growth as it may weaken tourism management (Haase et al., 2009). A major factor limiting the scope for regulating tourism is the fact that no nation exercises sovereignty over the continent. The IAATO (IAATO, 2014) is a well-established institution “dedicated to facilitating appropriate, safe, and environmentally sound private-sector travel to the Antarctic”. Its approach is based on self-regulation. Its stated aims are “to focus activities in support of its mission statement to ensure effective day-to-day management of member activities in Antarctica; educational outreach, including scientific collaboration; and the development and promotion of Antarctic tourism industry best practices. In addition, the IAATO strives to turn returning visitors into ‘ambassadors’ for Antarctica, serving as champions for conservation efforts to protect The White Continent”. Thus, management is actually self-regulation and there is growing doubt about its effectiveness. A growing band of critics see Antarctic tourism as an environmental plague. Management of Antarctica is based on self-organisation, driven by the clear collective interest of users in maintaining the quality of the key attractions. Although IAATO is acknowledged as a key player for in situ management (Beck, 1994), self-imposed codes of conduct are maintained by peer pressure (Liggett et al., 2010), and by detailed pre-landing briefings for tourists (Vidas, 1996; Buck, 1998; Joyner, 1998; Mason and Legg, 1999; Liggett et al., 2011; Lamers et al., 2012).

To what extent can one rely on self-regulation? Some authors believe that it is hard to maintain, especially given the fact that joint management of the continent by various nation states does not enable an agreement to be reached on specific management issues

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