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MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE SOUTHERN OCEAN: THE TOURISM DIMENSION

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ABSTRACT

Antarctica tour operators are one of the main users of the waters around Antarctica and have a significant stake in keeping the Antarctic environment and ecosystems pristine in order to protect the natural values that make the Antarctic experience unique. This article examines the linkages between Antarctic tourism and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Southern Ocean, and argues that the explicit support of tour operators for the adoption of MPAs can have favourable outcomes for marine protection. In order to do this, Antarctica tour operators need take a more active – or less neutral – stand in support of MPAs.

KEY WORDS

Antarctica, Antarctic tourism, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), Southern Ocean, CCAMLR

INTRODUCTION

Fisheries and tourism are the most significant industries active in Antarctica in terms of inter alia their revenue, physical presence in the region and political influence in Antarctic Treaty System bodies.

Fisheries and tourism operate in most parts of Antarctica accessible to them, but much of their activities focus on the NW Antarctic Peninsula and Scotia Sea (particularly for the krill fisheries) and in the Ross Sea region (particularly for the toothfish fisheries). In particular, krill fishing operations take place at times in coastal areas nearby colonies of land based predators that are the focus of tourist landings.¹

Fisheries are regulated by Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), while tourism is regulated by the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM). These are the two main international decision making bodies of the Antarctic Treaty System.

The vast majority of Antarctica tour operators are represented by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, IAATO.² IAATO is politically influential at the ATCM, which although formally tasked to regulate tourism is generally happy to de facto delegate the management of tourism to IAATO. IAATO is particularly influential with some ATCPs with which it works closely. IAATO agrees on measures to coordinate and streamline the activities of its members while aiming to limit their environmental impact.³ One of IAATO's bylaws states that "Members subscribe to the principle that their planned activities will have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment". This terminology derives from the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty and marks the threshold for which the lower of three levels of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is required. The higher the level impact of a proposed activity, the higher the level of EIA required, and the greater the scrutiny and regulatory requirements.

Cruising is the dominant form of tourism in Antarctica, and native seabirds and marine mammals are quintessential Antarctic tourism attractions both on land and at sea.⁴ Consequently, Antarctica tour operators are one of the main users of the Southern Ocean and have a significant stake in keeping the Antarctic environment and ecosystems pristine in order to protect the natural values that make the Antarctic experience unique. This is particularly the case as the industry prides itself on the environmental protection initiatives.

This article examines the linkages between Antarctic tourism and Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Southern Ocean, and argues that a explicit support of tour operators for the adoption of MPAs can have favourable outcomes for marine protection. In order to do this, tour operators need take a more active – or less neutral – stand in support of MPAs.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Antarctica

International discussions about the adoption of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Antarctica are one of the most significant as well as controversial discussions concerning the management and governance of the Antarctic in recent decades.

CCAMLR, an international body tasked with the conservation of marine life in the Southern Ocean, committed in 2009 to designating a network of marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2012. The Southern Ocean surrounds the Antarctic continent on the southern end of the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Ocean. A network of MPAs in these region, protecting representative, unique and vulnerable areas of the ocean, would effectively create a “ring” of marine protection around the Antarctic continent. These areas would also contribute to increase resilience to climate change and create scientific reference areas.⁵

A MPA for the South Orkney Islands Southern Shelf was adopted by CCAMLR in 2009, the first high seas MPA globally.⁶ This was followed by a General framework for the establishment of CCAMLR Marine Protected Areas in 2011, aimed to streamline the process of adoption of later MPAs.⁶

After this initial progress, discussions to create two large marine protected areas in the Ross Sea and in East Antarctica since 2012 came to a virtual standstill. During several years of discussions the proposed MPAs lost between 30 and 50% of their proposed area. This was due to opposition by a few Members of the CCAMLR, which makes decisions by consensus among its Members (currently 24 states and the European Union). Common conservation objectives are heavily influenced by fishing, geopolitical and other national interests of individual Members.

This state of affairs changed dramatically in October 2016 when the Ross Sea region marine protected area was adopted by the CCAMLR. At over 1.5 million square kilometres excluding floating ice shelves, much of it no-take, this is the largest MPA adopted to date worldwide.⁸

The adoption of the Ross Sea region MPA, which became effective in December 2017, was a significant milestone in a longer-term process of enhancing marine protection in the Southern Ocean. Aside the East Antarctica MPA, other MPA proposals for the Southern Ocean are under discussion by CCAMLR are the Weddell Sea region MPA (formally proposed for adoption since 2016), and the Domain 1 MPA in the NW of the Antarctic Peninsula (since 2018). However, no other MPAs have been adopted since the Ross Sea MPA largely due to opposition led by some CCAMLR Members.

The Antarctic tourism industry and CCAMLR MPAs

While the CCAMLR MPA debate was taking place, the Antarctic tourism was very active in the ATCM but remained absent from meetings of the CCAMLR and from the MPA debate. Further, some tour operators had lingering concerns as to how CCAMLR measures would impact IAATO members activities. This was the case even though CCAMLR MPAs only apply to fishing and research vessels doing research relevant to CCAMLR. Discussion for the management of other activities is the remit of the Antarctic Treaty Parties (through its decision making body, the ATCM) and not through CCAMLR.

The adoption of the Ross Sea region MPA made it apparent that the Antarctic tourism cruise operators, individually and collectively through IAATO, had to have an opinion on this issue. One tour operator has already issued a formal statement supporting current and future MPAs in Antarctica.⁹ To our knowledge this has not been replicated by other tour operators yet, however in

recent years the tourism industry was interested in learning about MPA discussions at CCAMLR.

In October 2018 IAATO representatives participated as an observer to CCAMLR where they could witness first-hand the exchanges for or against conservation initiatives, including MPAs. In 2018 CCAMLR discussions were particularly polarised for and against conservation. One would imagine that for an organisation that promotes inter alia the creation of a corps of “Antarctic Ambassadors” it is clear on what side of the fence they should be.

Supporting marine protection in Antarctica

Antarctica has no indigenous people and no long-term residents, so it is up to people from outside the region to promote conservation initiatives. In order to do this, decision-makers and the bodies that govern Antarctica and the Southern Ocean need to know that there is substantial public interest in ensuring long-term protection of the marine environment. Environmental NGOs such as Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) are one of the stakeholders that fill this role.

Most Antarctica tour operators have a significant, long-term stake in the Antarctic region. As regular users of the Southern Ocean with an interest on preserving the values that make the region attractive to tourists, tour operators can both encourage and put pressure directly on their country representatives making decisions about the Antarctic. Tourism can support protected areas in Antarctica first of all politically through outreach to decision-makers and also through public outreach. Politically IAATO is active at the ATS and has the support of many ATCPs. In addition, many Antarctica tour operators are based in Antarctic Treaty and CCAMLR member countries. As noted in a document submitted to the XLII ATCM, “ASOC hopes that the tourism industry will become more closely involved in the MPA process, particularly in the Antarctic Peninsula area where shipborne tourism concentrates, and will contribute actively to promote a high standard of marine protection that is essential for the tourism business.”¹⁰

In parallel, tourism is a global industry in rapid expansion. Worldwide there are examples of ecologically sustainable tourism that in some instances has contributed to conservation.¹¹ There are also examples in which tourism has caused negative impacts in its destinations, including a phenomenon known as “overtourism”.¹² At the moment there is great demand for travelling to the Antarctic region and the industry is expanding rapidly, with a 40% increase anticipated for 2019-2020 with respect to the previous season.¹³ At the same time, the vast majority of Antarctic tourism activity focuses on a relatively small part of the Antarctic Peninsula. This might lead to excessive use of some locations, perhaps with early indications of “overtourism” in Antarctica, at least in some places at some times. The risks of expanding cruise tourism growth require more than ever proactive support for marine protection from the tourism industry.

Aside the industry and IAATO, there is also a potential role for Antarctic tourists – as consumers, voters/taxpayers of Antarctic Treaty states, and global citizens – to support the CCAMLR MPA process in various ways. Tourists can also contribute, by demonstrating their support for marine protection, for instance by signing letters and petitions organised by ENGOs to their country representatives at CCAMLR, and other decision-makers in their countries.

Furthermore, spatial marine protection is not only about designating MPAs on paper, but also about implementing them effectively for the longer term. Financial contributions to conservation, research and monitoring initiatives, and participation in “citizen science” projects using cruise vessels as a research platform are some of the other ways in which tourism can contribute to marine protection in the Southern Ocean.¹⁴

CONCLUSIONS

In Antarctica, preventing degradation of the sites used by tour operators visit – which often include breeding and resting grounds for land-based seabirds and marine mammals – and promoting marine protection through the creation of MPAs are part of the same equation. It is in the long-term interest of the tourism industry to preserve the marine environment and ecosystems of Antarctica.

In order to do this, Antarctica tour operators need take a more active – or less neutral – stand in support of MPAs. This is particularly important as the Antarctic cruise tourism industry is expanding. The tourism industry can be an additional voice for political outreach and development of public support towards the establishment of a network of meaningful marine protected areas in Antarctica – meaning areas that are large, permanent, and protect unique, vulnerable and representative areas including through the use of fully protected no-take zones where no fishing occurs.

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1. See e.g. Favero.

2. Fishing organisations representing the more proactive segment of the industry are part of the Association of Responsible Krill harvesting companies (ARK) and the Coalition of Legal Toothfish Operators (COLTO). These attend CCAMLR meetings as observers.

3. See e.g. articles by Favero and by Lynnes

4. For a more detailed description of the Antarctic tourism industry see e.g. articles by Roura and by Vereda and Jensen.

5. ASOC 2019a.

6. CCAMLR Conservation Measure 91-03, 2009.

7. CCAMLR Conservation Measure 91-04, 2011.

8. CCAMLR Conservation Measure 91-05, 2016.

9. <https://oceanwide-expeditions.com/blog/oceanwide-expeditions-supports-current-and-future-marine-protected-areas-in-antarctica>.

10. ASOC 2019a.

11. For examples in which tourism has contributed to conservation initiatives, see <https://www.ltandc.org/>

examples!

12. See Roura, this volume.

13. ASOC 2019b.

14. See Farmer, this volume.

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