

Observing sustainable tourism in Antarctica

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“Antarctica is the ultimate destination for anyone interested in natural history but it also challenges those people who visit to think broadly about our responsibilities to all life on Earth.” That’s the view of Dr Robert Lambert, a lecturer on Tourism and the Environment at The University of Nottingham, who has just returned from the Antarctic in his role as an Observer for the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO).

Dr Lambert, who is a member of the Business School’s Christel DeHaan Tourism and Travel Research Institute, says the relationship between nature and people is complex and constantly changing and great positives can come from tourism in Antarctica. He believes those lucky enough to experience it could become ambassadors for the region to help develop a ‘constituency’ of support for Antarctica.

He said: “Few people get the opportunity to visit this extraordinary place, and those who experience it first hand return home with a powerful sense of wonder and concern for the myriad threats that it faces. I believe there’s a huge sense of goodwill for the region that could be passed on by these tourist ambassadors to the rest of society.”

Dr Lambert, who is based at the Nottingham University Business School and the School of History, spent 12 days onboard a cruise ship making its first voyage to Antarctica. His job was to monitor the running of the ship and the conduct of its crew and passengers as they sailed through one of the largest and most fragile wildernesses on earth.

Dr Lambert, who was appointed as an Observer for IAATO in 2005, has a particular interest in seabirds and cetaceans. He said: “Serving as an IAATO Observer is the best kind of public service, where I am confident that the sustainable tourism report I compile will make a difference.”

The Antarctic tourist season runs from October to April and has flourished in the last thirty years — growing from around 6,000 visitors in the mid-1990s to 35,000 in 2006. In 1991, in recognition of the potential environmental impact, IAATO was set up promote the highest possible standards of travel. It now has 100 members from 15 different countries.

The Antarctic supports immense marine biodiversity, including numerous species of seabirds and iconic penguin and albatross species, as well as seals, whales and countless billions of marine invertebrates that fuel the food chain.

The region was afforded special protection under the 1959 Antarctic Treaty and the adoption in 1991 of the Environmental Protocol. This designates Antarctica as a natural reserve devoted to peace and science and seeks to ensure that human activities, including tourism, do not have adverse impacts on the Antarctic environment, or on its scientific and aesthetic values.

IAATO’s observer scheme was established just over ten years ago. Their Observers sail onboard ships making their maiden voyage to Antarctica.

Denise Landau, Executive Director of IAATO said: “Effective self-regulation and the development of best practices by industry, government and the science community are necessary in order to protect the Antarctic environment. IAATO is a member organization founded in 1991 to advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally

responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic. Over the last 17 years we have developed a system of management principles and guidelines which have successfully mitigated environmental impacts and provided a framework for sustainable travel in the Antarctic.”

Dr Lambert is an expert on the relationship between tourism and the environment. His job onboard was to ensure that rigorous IAATO guidelines are upheld. This included everything from waste disposal, the details of crew and staff briefings to contingency and emergency medical evacuation plans. The regulations stop anything from cigarettes and food, even golf balls, going overboard.

This was Dr Lambert’s second trip in his role as Observer for IAATO. In 2005 he served onboard the Argentinean-owned tourist cruise ship MV Ushuaia. He said passengers on that cruise experienced a powerful environmental awakening and his own experience had real benefits for his teaching and research. He has found that this direct experience allows him to speak to his popular undergraduate module on ‘Managing Tourism and the Environment’ with greater authority and clarity on the complex issues around the development of sustainable tourism initiatives in Antarctica.

Source: University of Nottingham

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