

Nations set new tourism limits for Antarctica

April 19 2009, By MATTHEW LEE , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Countries with interests in Antarctica have endorsed U.S.-proposed mandatory limits on Antarctic tourism that aim to protect the continent's fragile environment, officials said Friday.

At the conclusion of a two-week meeting in Baltimore, Md., the parties to the 50-year-old Antarctic Treaty agreed to impose binding restrictions on the size of cruise ships that land passengers there and the number of people they can bring ashore at any one time, the officials said. The move mandates, under international law, current voluntary limits.

The changes will become legally binding once each of the 28 nations that have signed the treaty ratify them. The revisions were adopted by consensus with no opposition and no hurdles to ratification are expected, said Evan Bloom, the head of the U.S. delegation.

The restrictions do not contain a specific enforcement mechanism or penalties for limiting tourist operations. But they will require signatories to the pact to ensure that Antarctic tour operators bar ships with more than 500 passengers from landing sites, restrict landings to one vessel at a time per site and limit passengers on shore to 100 at a time.

They also mandate a minimum of one guide for every 20 tourists while ashore, according to the documents.

Limiting tourist access to the continent has taken on urgency because of a surge in visits and recent cruise ship accidents, including two groundings in the just-finished 2008-09 season and the highly publicized

sinking of a vessel in November 2007.

The International Association of [Antarctica](#) Tour Operators says visits have risen from 6,700 in the 1992-93 season to 29,500 in the 2006-07 season and 45,213 in 2008-09.

Members of the association first developed the restrictions, adhere to them voluntarily and supported the proposal to make them mandatory.

On the Net:

Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty: <http://www.ats.aq/index-e.htm>

Treaty background: <http://www.scar.org/treaty/>

International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators:
<http://www.iaato.org/>

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