



Summary for IAATO Members of the main points arising from the

# South Georgia Visitor Monitoring Trial 2008-9

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Last season (08/09) the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) funded a pilot study to monitor tourism and visitor landings on South Georgia. This was undertaken by the Sub Antarctic Foundation for Ecosystems Research (SAFER) and the Tourism Group at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). The study included on-site observations of landings to assess the management of passengers ashore and interactions with wildlife. Data loggers were deployed to monitor passenger movements and questionnaires were used to assess passenger knowledge and awareness of issues such as wildlife protection measures and the importance of biosecurity protocols.

The timing of this study coincided with the recent publication of the revised visitor management policy (which restricts non-IAATO commercial vessels to landings at Grytviken). It is important now for GSGSSI to ensure that there is thorough stewardship of tourism management under the new policy and that standards and permit conditions are being maintained and observed throughout the industry as a whole.

The findings of this pilot study are still being fully assessed by GSGSSI and priorities for future work identified. Subject to funding, GSGSSI is likely to take forward elements of this study in the coming seasons. GSGSSI believes that IAATO involvement in the next phase of monitoring is essential if the Government's objectives are to be achieved and maximum benefit derived by the industry.

GSGSSI would hope and expect IAATO Members to work with Government to address any improvements to South Georgia tourism operations, which are identified as requiring further attention. IAATO members are all committed to maintaining high standards of practice and this forms the basis of the Government's policy to exclusively support this organisation and only permit IAATO commercial operators to land passengers at approved sites throughout South Georgia.

Though last season's project was only a pilot study, data was collected from 23 vessel landings with over 86 man-hours of direct observation of tourist and staff activities ashore.

The majority of these observations were undertaken in the vicinity of Grytviken. GSGSSI recognises that some operators treat this site more as a historic sight (as opposed to a wildlife site.) Any future monitoring would need to involve more work at other sites with larger concentrations of wildlife. Nevertheless, GSGSSI still expects the same standard of passenger management ashore at all sites and this includes compliance with wildlife protection measures, regardless of the wildlife density.

What was apparent, even from this limited study, is that passenger management regimes and their effectiveness vary greatly between ships. Different strengths and weaknesses have been identified and it is these areas which GSGSSI intends to focus on in coming seasons.

GSGSSI has identified the following as being key points arising from this pilot study. All South Georgia vessel operators should take note of these points and please ensure that their Expedition Leaders (EL's) and staff focus on these areas in the coming season.



## Key points to note

- Whilst maintaining the IAATO minimum ratio of staff to passengers, Expedition Leaders (EL's) must ensure that all such staff are confident and capable of effectively managing passengers ashore. Staff ashore who lacked confidence in this role were observed regularly, thereby undermining the requirement for an adequate staff to passenger ratio.
- Fully guided passenger groups exhibited the highest levels of compliance with codes of conduct ashore. In particular there were fewer incidents of wildlife protection infringements observed when groups of passengers were effectively guided and monitored by capable staff. When passengers are permitted to roam more freely staff must remain extremely vigilant and intervene swiftly as necessary. This is important as passenger knowledge of minimum approach distances was found to be weak. Observations strongly suggest that free roaming passengers from smaller ships need to be far more thoroughly briefed, especially as a perception exists amongst the majority of these passengers that they are very well informed.
- Where the IAATO recommended approach distance to an animal is 5- 10m, the general perception (including staff as well as passengers) is that 5m is the only distance that counts. Only 2% of the 345 people surveyed were aware of the 5-10m recommended approach distance from seals and penguins.
- The following incidents were observed:
  - i) Regular incidents of passengers being photographed well within 5m of seals and penguins, and similarly photographers blatantly ignoring minimum distances.
  - ii) Failure to give animals the right of way and passenger groups surrounding wildlife.
  - iii) On occasions penguins (including moulting birds) were herded considerable distances by encroaching photographers (over prolonged periods).
  - iv) The deliberate movement of both fur and elephant seals to assist with ease of passenger movements ashore.
- Biosecurity protocols need to be tightened up. The quality of boot cleaning prior to departing from the landing site varied greatly. Many passengers left open bags unattended on the ground and there was no checking of any bags observed before passengers and staff returned to their ships. A number of vessels also left open sacks to on the shore to stow lifejackets in. (This is particularly concerning). One staff member was even observed eating fruit ashore.
- Whilst Grytviken may be considered by some staff to be purely of historic interest, the same GSGSSI and IAATO wildlife protection measures must be observed at all SG landing sites. Though it should also be noted that in addition to wildlife protection issues, some free roaming passengers were also observed attempting to enter closed historical buildings at Grytviken.
- A high degree of compliance was observed in respect of artefact security (with the exception of one staff member), adherence to site management plans, protection of vegetation and wildlife interactions (in terms of not feeding or touching.)
- Compliance varied greatly in respect of the biosecurity measures outlined above and wildlife approach distances, both on land and at sea in Zodiacs. It was concerning to note that in the case of one ship, the majority of all visitor-wildlife interactions were closer than the IAATO guidelines state.
- A large percentage of passengers interviewed had not viewed the South Georgia Government briefing DVD. This is not intended to replace verbal briefings, but GSGSSI does expect passengers to watch this, prior to their arrival at South Georgia. Operators requiring new DVD's should contact either GSGSSI directly or their agents in Stanley (and specify whether they require PAL or NTSC).

In the coming season GSGSSI will have an additional Government Officer working at KEP and we will aim to focus attention on the points identified in this pilot study. GSGSSI also intends to extend some form of monitoring work (with IAATO involvement) to other approved landing sites in the coming seasons.

For the coming season, vessel operators should please ensure that their staff are fully appraised of the points arising from last season's monitoring of landings.

GSGSSI will discuss with the IAATO Executive Staff plans for future visitor monitoring and how to involve IAATO directly in this work.

Our thanks go to all the vessel operators and staff who assisted with the logistics for this survey and who helped facilitate the completion of the visitor questionnaires.

**Richard McKee**, Executive Officer

Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands  
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