

# IAATO Procedures Upon the Discovery of a High Mortality Event

## Background:

The code of practice for reporting and responding to a potentially high wildlife mortality event requires swift dissemination of observed and recorded information, in order to assist in preventing contamination between sites and contribute valuable information to the analysis and containment of a potential threat to the wildlife.

A high mortality event can be defined as an incident of unusually high mortality, or illness, in birds or other animals in relation to the population size in the area concerned. A number of factors may be responsible for the event, including infectious diseases, poisoning, exceptionally adverse weather conditions, changing sea ice conditions, heavy predation or critical food shortages. As an example in the recent past, incidents of avian cholera have been observed in penguin colonies, resulting in high mortality.

The precise definition of a high mortality event, and its cause, is open to interpretation. For example, in areas *outside* of high concentrations of wildlife, ten or more dead birds or animals in the same location at the same time could constitute a high mortality event<sup>1</sup>. In areas of high concentrations of wildlife, other factors, such as the normal chick survival rate, as generally known for the species, would need to be taken into account. Diseased birds or animals may display behaviours such as staggering, falling, paralysis, inability to rise or disinclination to move when approached. Coughing, sneezing, excessive nasal discharge, ocular discharge, apparent blindness, diarrhea or bloody or fetid feces can also be indicators of disease. Ultimately, it will be experience of what is normal for that species in that location that will dictate whether the incident can be perceived as a high mortality event or not.

However, any highly unusual event, whether indisputable or perceived, should be noted and reported immediately.

## Procedures on discovery of a high mortality event:

In the event of discovering a potentially high mortality event, tour operators should perform the following steps:

- Where the operator has reason to believe that landing passengers could lead to significant environmental impact to wildlife or the translocation of disease or may otherwise be ill-advised, the landing should be aborted.
- Do not walk among sick or dead animals.
- Do not collect samples or handle sick or dead animals
- Ensure standard boot and clothing decontamination procedures are thorough and completed for all clothing worn and any equipment used.
- *Immediately* report the event to IAATO, the nearest scientific station and ships operating in the area, including the information requested below.
- Notify the national authority from which the tour organizer received advance notification, of the incident.

## Information required for high mortality event report:

1. Date:
2. Time in GMT:
3. Location, including name and co-ordinates (use GPS if possible):
4. Name of observer and vessel:
5. Species, noting whether adults or chicks/pups affected:
6. Number of individuals dead or dying and an estimated percentage of colony:
7. The surface area they covered:
8. Descriptions of any distinctive markings, or not, on the carcasses, or of any symptoms shown by dying animals:
9. Reference to recent extreme weather conditions (if any) or any other environmental or human disturbance factors that may potentially be linked to the event:
10. Include as many photographic & video records as possible:
11. Any other observations that could be relevant.

<sup>1</sup> As defined by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.