

IAATO Operational Procedures Upon the Discovery of a High or Unusual Mortality Event

Background

The code of practice for reporting and responding to a potentially high or unusual wildlife mortality/morbidity event requires swift dissemination of observed and recorded information. Such rapid action helps to prevent contamination between sites and contributes valuable information to the analysis and containment of a potential threat to wildlife.

What is a high or unusual mortality/morbidity event?

The precise definition of a high or unusual mortality/morbidity event, and its cause, is open to interpretation. For the purposes of this document, an unusual mortality or morbidity event in wildlife is defined as a noteworthy occurrence of one or more sick or dead animals clustered in space and time¹. An event is considered unusual if the circumstances of dead or sick wildlife differ from what is anticipated or involves a significant number of individuals relative to the population size in the area concerned.

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. 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.

The cause of an unusual or high mortality/morbidity event in Antarctica is likely to be unknown. 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 past, incidents of avian cholera have been observed in penguin colonies, resulting in high mortality.

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

A note on whale strikes and other wildlife incidents

Whale strikes should be reported to IAATO using the appropriate report form in the IAATO Field Operations Manual and, if required, your National Competent Authority.

Other incidents where an animal has been injured or killed as a result of human activities, whether through tourism operations or not, should be reported to IAATO using the Incident Report Form in the IAATO Field Operations Manual.

¹As taken from a description by the World Organisation for Animal Health (<https://www.woah.org>)



Procedures on discovery of a high mortality/morbidity event:

In the event of discovering a potentially high or unusual mortality/morbidity 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 unless you have a permit that specifically states that this activity is allowed;
- 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 (operations@iaato.org) and ships operating in the area. Include the information requested below.
- Notify the national authority from which the tour organizer received a permit/authorisation, of the incident.
- If possible, take photos and video from a safe distance to help experts with diagnoses.

Information required for high or unusual mortality/morbidity event report:

Date of visit	
Time in UTC	
Location, including name and co-ordinates (use GPS if possible)	
General description/reason for concerns	
Species affected	
Life stages (s) affected (e.g., adults, chicks/pups)	
Approximate number of individuals dead or dying (per species and life stage)	
Estimated proportion of colony/animals affected	
Description of any symptoms in sick or dying animals (e.g., behaviour, respiratory distress, discharge) or distinctive markings, or not, on dead animals.	
Reference to recent extreme weather conditions (if any) or any other environmental or human disturbance factors that may potentially be linked to the event	
Are you including photographic or video records (please include as many as possible)?	
Any other observations that could be relevant	