

Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

Annual Update to IAATO 2017

1. Overview

Overall the season went well without any serious incidents and the Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands wishes to thank the visiting vessels and IAATO operators for all their efforts in delivering a successful season, in particular to rigorously applying the biosecurity measures before every landing. Whilst there can never be any room for complacency in this area, it was clear to the Government Officers at King Edward Point that there had been an overall further improvement in standards this season.

The 2016-17 season has, for a second successive year, been the busiest to date with approximately 8,946 visitors arriving on 68 cruise ship visits. This is despite the fact that 3 cruise ship visits were cancelled, whilst an additional 2 projected visits did not subsequently proceed and yacht visit numbers for the season were down from last season's high of 21 to 8. Expedition applications returned to normal levels following last season's Shackleton centenary anniversary year (11 Expeditions), with 6 expeditions being undertaken this season (5 of which were Shackleton Traverse expeditions).

Work and maintenance has also been progressing in Grytviken. This has included replacing (and making safe) the Main Store roof as well as attending to the upkeep of the Engineers Workshop and undertaking careful conservation work to preserve and repair the church windows. This work, which has received significant funding from the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, will continue next season under the direction of the Government's new Works and Heritage Manager.

The weed eradication team have had another busy season and very encouraging progress with the recovery of native flora has been observed following the removal of the reindeer. Indications remain positive that the SGHT's rodent eradication project has been successful, and at a local level this has culminated recently in pipits nesting within the immediate vicinity of the base at King Edward Point. The coming 12 months will be a busy period for final phase of significant habitat monitoring work by the SGHT, supported by GSGSSI.

Whilst the Government always endeavours to utilise our own shipping assets as much as possible and minimise the burden of requests for assistance from operators, it would not have been possible to achieve so much this season without the assistance from a number of operators with the carriage of several contractors and staff. This has been appreciated greatly.

Early in the new year King Edward Point (KEP) experienced a significant communications failure, losing the base's principal email and voice communications. GSGSSI wishes to thank all of the visiting staff for their patience and perseverance throughout this challenging period. GSGSSI is now

engaging closely with BAS to address the issues, which lead to this failure, as well as improving the redundancy capability on base. ELs should also remember that back-up communication information is detailed in their “Information for Visitors to South Georgia” briefing document and this is updated annually in advance of permitting.

The final significant project of the season delivered a scoping survey of the former whaling stations to establish the condition of the residual waste oil in the structures and formulate recommendations for the most appropriate method of remediation. This survey also included additional asbestos monitoring and survey work to meet the requirements of the GSGSSI asbestos management plan and ensure this remains current and fit for purpose.

2. Medical Review completed

In November the medical review commissioned by GSGSSI was completed and the Government was pleased to be able to provide guidelines to operators for planning the provision of medical care for visits to South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands.

The review was commissioned as a result of direct recommendations and comments made by the SGSSI Coroner, following the inquest into the death of a visitor on South Georgia. These took into consideration the challenges faced in delivering appropriate medical provision and care in this remote environment. The guidelines were prepared for GSGSSI by World Extreme Medicine and took into account the consultation with industry stakeholders and the feedback from a medical expert peer review process.

The guidelines identify the key medical risks, provide guidance and suggested example lists of equipment and medical supplies for vessel operators to consider when planning for the provision of medical care on their vessels. The guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive or comprehensive but GSGSSI hopes that operators will read the guidelines carefully. It is the responsibility of all commercial (and private) visitors to act as they see fit, taking further advice as they think necessary to determine the level of medical care provision appropriate for their vessels. GSGSSI hopes these guidelines will be helpful and prove useful to visiting tourist vessels and private vessels alike.

It was noted this season that a number of vessels are still requesting medical assistance from KEP for non urgent cases and operators are reminded that medical support is provided for station personnel only, except in cases of emergency.

3. Administration

The application forms and new database for managing permitting and facilitating Government Officer access to application information worked well last season. Thank you to all visit applicants for ensuring that current documentation is being used.

There will be no changes made to the visitor fee structure for the coming season and, for the most part, advance visitor fee payments and the submission of Post Visit Reports have progressed well in good time. This too is appreciated.

GSGSSI and IAATO are currently collaborating to try and establish a single electronic format PVR, which will meet the requirements of both the Government and the Organisation. We hope very much that this will be in place before the start of next season and that this will greatly assist both visiting ELs and our own Government Officers and data managers.

You may be aware that I am moving on from GSGSSI later this year. To assist with the transition to new arrangements, please can operators therefore ensure that in future all correspondence and applications are directed to the Jenni Sol, the GSGSSI Finance, Administration and Logistics Officer (admin@gov.gs).

All visit applicants are reminded that the maximum time limit beyond which Expedition Leaders require a formal briefing update at Grytviken (if they have not led a visit to South Georgia as an EL during this time frame) is 3 seasons. Whilst it is possible for staff to be briefed earlier in the same season in which they intend to visit (and then assume responsibility as EL before the season closes), staff cannot be briefed in advance of a subsequent season.

It is essential also that all pre-arrival communication regarding vessel intentions and arrival formalities is always directed to the Government Officers in the first instance. (This local GSGSSI administrative responsibility is wholly separate to the museum).

A revision of the current briefing DVD is planned for the future, but ELs are reminded that a reduced version, principally for crew normally (covering key points) and also a version with Chinese subtitles are both now available.

4. Legislation

It is expected that the new GSGSSI Immigration Ordinance will be enacted within 6 months and a separate consultation process will soon commence to review the proposed new permitting structure for visiting vessels.

In real terms, vessel applicants will not notice any significant changes. Approaching vessels will be required to submit passenger manifests in advance of their arrival and persons going ashore will be required to have valid passports (though there will be discretionary powers in place for the Commissioner to intervene in situations such as a passenger's passport being stolen prior to embarkation).

5. Development of Terrestrial Protected Areas

GSGSSI has carefully considered feedback from stakeholders and is continuing to evaluate the development of a network of Terrestrial Protected Areas (TPAs) and will be engaging stakeholders further in the development of proposals this

year. This is an important project for South Georgia to complement the existing Marine Protected Area and contribute to the UK's commitments to global conservation targets including CBD Aichi Biodiversity Targets and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

GSGSSI is engaging the World Conservation Monitoring Centre within the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to develop this process.

This process is likely to involve:

- Identifying key experts and stakeholders
- Data collection and data gaps assessment
- Preliminary spatial analyses and results
- Stakeholder consultation workshop
- Spatial analysis following stakeholder input
- Second stakeholder consultation workshop
- Delivery of technical report, database and draft management plans

Before any work commences, all areas of data will be considered along with a stakeholder analysis to establish the expectations, needs and concerns of all SGSSI's stakeholder groups.

6. IAATO Category II Vessel site access

There are currently 39 approved visitor landing sites on South Georgia, which are open to IAATO Category I vessels (up to 200 passengers) as well as 4 other approved sites where landings are not permitted (Zodiac cruising only). IAATO Category II vessels (201-500 passengers) are currently only permitted to land at 6 of these approved visitor sites (including Grytviken).

This policy reflects an historic position that some sites were considered better suited to extended visitor landings; involving larger ships supporting significantly more Zodiac / boating activity, potentially over longer periods (with a maximum of 100 passengers ashore at any one time).

Following correspondence with a number of IAATO members and developments within the industry, GSGSSI is undertaking a review of this policy noting that:

- An increasing number of new expedition vessels now have a passenger capacity of 200 - 250 passengers. To all intents and purposes, these are not significantly different to Category I vessels (and all visiting vessels remain limited to landing a max of 100 passengers at anyone time).
- Limiting the number of sites available to Category II vessels, limits options for the Master (reducing ability and options to react to changing circumstances and alter plans) and this has the potential to impact safe decision making.
- Masters should use their experience and discretion to assess every

landing option (and they have increasingly advanced technical aids systems to assist them in this process).

To aid our consideration of future Government policy, the view of IAATO Members is sought on the following:

- Should IAATO Category II vessel access to all approved visitor sites be permitted at the discretion of the Master?
- Would this create any potential site access complications for other Category I vessels (if longer time frames are required for some larger vessels to complete landings)?
- Should any restrictions be in place for any specific sites (e.g. possibly limiting size of vessel to 250 pax)? For example access limitations to restricted sites (such as Prion Island)?

Please can members provide written feedback to the GSGSSI (either directly or through IAATO) by 31 May.

6. Biosecurity

Following a few early biosecurity breaches on visiting yachts, the Government Officers (who continued to inspect persons going ashore throughout the season), praised the efforts of staff and visitors in ensuring that personal checks were being rigorously implemented.

In the coming season GSGSSI will be supporting SGHT with elements of a major survey to follow up the final phase (2015) of the SGHT habitat restoration project to eradicate rats and mice. As well as checking detection devices, this work is expected to involve the deployment of specially trained dog(s) to check for any evidence of rodents.

To date, however, the continued reports of species recovery, in areas which were previously rat infested, are all most encouraging. Biosecurity is a Government priority and in line with our biosecurity objectives the Government is looking to establish a trial biosecurity detector dog programme based in the Falkland Islands. The trial will seek to deploy detector dogs on a range of vessels departing from the Falkland Islands for South Georgia between February-April 2018. Operators will be requested to participate in this programme for which further details will be provided.

7. Fur seals

With the numbers of fur seals still increasing, so the concern grows for the safety of visitors and the welfare of seals in the vicinity of visitor landing sites. GSGSSI has welcomed the opportunity to work closely with IAATO to review the guidelines which will be issued for next season. On a number of occasions last season Government Officers felt it was necessary to intervene and assist passengers who were unaware that they had placed themselves in a hazardous

position. The importance of the safety briefings for passengers and effective oversight ashore cannot be underestimated.

8. Future Projects

- **Oil remediation work:** GSGSSI has recently commissioned a scoping project to undertake a review of the management options for the residual fuel, which is still present in the former whaling stations (following previous remediation projects). This survey also included monitoring for and surveying of asbestos in various parts of the prohibited areas around the former stations to ensure that the current management plan remains up to date. A separate project has been commissioned to identify policy options for the future use of heavy fuel oil and bunkering activity in the South Georgia Maritime Zone.
- **Heritage review:** GSGSSI is working with external heritage consultants and the HAP (which includes SGHT representation) to progress the next stage of GSGSSI's heritage policy review process. This will develop the policy and legislation necessary to protect the Territory's heritage and develop the criteria and process for prioritising conservation work, to develop appropriate and credible management plans for priority projects throughout the Territory. This process will also involve the development of a specific conservation management plan for Grytviken, which will build on the important work carried out in recent seasons. GSGSSI remains very grateful for the contribution of the Norwegian Government's Directorate for Cultural Heritage to this work.
- **Dias / Viola:** The Viola Trust is continuing to investigate the possibility of the *Dias / Viola* being returned to Hull in 2017/18 for restoration and long term conservation as a museum exhibit. The project has been reviewed by GSGSSI's Heritage Advisory Panel.
- **New Polar Vessel:** GSGSSI is working closely with the British Antarctic Survey to develop plans to improve the KEP jetty and shore infrastructure to support the New Polar Vessel, the RRS *Sir David Attenborough*. Some work is expected to take place during the 2018/19 season, with the major construction work likely to take place in the 2019/20 season, though the final completion of works may extend into 2021. During this period every effort will be made to minimise any impact to visitors landing at Grytviken.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank members most sincerely for their past support and on-going efforts to facilitate safe visits to these incredible islands, whilst also ensuring that the environment and unique habitats continue to receive the upmost protection.

Richard McKee
Operations Director
Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands