



## South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands

Office of the Commissioner  
Government House,  
Stanley,  
Falkland Islands.

### **Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands briefing to IAATO 2013**

#### **2012/13 Season recap**

There was very little variation in the cruise ships figures for the 2012/13 season when compared with the 2011/12 season with again 51 cruise ship visits, carrying 5,792 passengers, (as opposed to 51 visits & 5,831 passengers in the previous season).

There was, however, more than a two-fold increase in yacht visits when compared with last season, with 16 visits carrying 100 passengers.

In addition there were 7 expeditions.

Matters arising included vessel bird strikes and access to the doctor at King Edward Point (KEP).

Following another recent (though relatively minor) bird strike, vessel operators are reminded of the importance of remaining vigilant for bird strikes, whilst taking all necessary measures to prevent them from happening. In the event of a bird strike, a rapid and appropriate response is essential. With ever-increasing areas of the island now free of rats, it is likely that this going to become an increasingly important vessel management consideration for future seasons.

Operators are also reminded that the doctor at KEP should not be called upon to provide medication or care (other than in exceptional circumstances). Vessels should all be self sufficient in every respect including medical care. In the event that the doctor is ever required to provide medication, operators are likely to face a £300 administrative fee. Staff should also remember that any passengers on medication must ensure that they carry adequate medication ashore with them to cover any unexpected delays with their return to the ship.

In other respects this season has been the busiest to date on a number of different fronts with various projects being undertaken. These have included:

- GSGSSI refurbishment and restoration of Discovery House at King Edward Point to accommodate visiting scientists.

- GSGSSI Grytviken management works and initial restoration work to the Nybrakka barracks building.
- Removal of the remaining asbestos from the Husvik villa and surrounds as well as asbestos surveys of the remaining vessels in Grytviken and the Nybrakka barracks.
- Laser survey of the Husvik and Grytviken whaling stations for heritage survey purposes (funded by the Norwegian and UK Governments.)
- GSGSSI funded small grant projects for visiting external scientists.
- GSGSSI and SGHT habitat restoration projects to eradicate invasive plants reindeer, rats and mice from large swathes of the island as well as the follow up monitoring and extensive ground surveys on foot, which are an essential component of these projects (and still on-going).

Needless to say there have been significant logistical challenges to be overcome both in terms of facilitating the movements of staff and equipment. Many different vessels and agencies have assisted and these have included a number of IAATO vessels. GSGSSI's sincere thanks go to all those involved. Without this assistance it would not have been possible to complete these important projects, all of which have the potential to make a very significant and positive contribution to South Georgia's future ecology, heritage management and scientific research.

## **Habitat Restoration Projects**

- Invasive Plants.

Work continues to progress with the efforts to control and eradicate invasive plant species, principally bittercress, in the vicinity of King Edward Point and Grytviken.

Efforts by expedition staff to manage visitors in the vicinity of the closed areas are much appreciated

- Reindeer

The GSGSSI is pleased to announce the successful completion of the first phase of the eradication of reindeer from the island of South Georgia. The first phase of the project, which ran throughout January and February 2013, saw the removal of over 1900 animals from the Busen area (one of two peninsulas on South Georgia that were inhabited by reindeer).

In January and February 2013 a group of Norwegian experts, including indigenous Sami herders and expert marksmen, joined GSGSSI staff to undertake this first phase of the project

Depending on the terrain, one of two methodologies was employed. In central areas, the team of Sami reindeer experts gathered the reindeer into a corral where they were humanely killed

under veterinary supervision. In outlying areas, where the terrain prevented herding, animals were shot by experienced marksmen from the Norwegian Nature Inspectorate (SNO).

Meat was recovered from approximately half of all animals that were killed, and proceeds from the sale of the meat will partially offset some of the costs of the eradication. This meat is now available for sale in Stanley. A number of IAATO vessels purchased meat at the end of last season. Stocks are limited and GSGSSI would encourage interested vessel operators to contact GSGSSI and reserve advanced orders for collection next season.

In parallel with the removal of reindeer, several scientific research projects are being undertaken, including the establishment of long-term monitoring programmes of plants, birds and invertebrates to track the recovery of the island's ecosystems following the eradication. It is encouraging that only a few weeks after the removal of the reindeer there are already good signs that the vegetation is recovering.

Any IAATO members who would like to find out more information about the project are encouraged to contact GSGSSI.

The next phase of the reindeer eradication will take place on the Barff Peninsula in early 2014.

- SGHT Habitat Restoration Project (Rats and Mice)

The second phase of the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) project to eradicate rats and mice is still in progress (at the time of writing). IAATO members have been briefed previously by the SGHT on this immense and ambitious project and further information is available on the SGHT website. To date, ground surveys of the Phase 1 Area (Thatcher, Greene and Mercer peninsulas) suggest that this first phase has been successful.

Phase 2 of the project commenced with the establishment of forward operating bases to the north and west of the Phase 1 area. Since the beginning of March aerial baiting has been in progress. The weather, however, has been extremely challenging at times and this has hampered progress.

Currently all of the Phase 2 areas, with the exception of the Northwest area of the island have now been baited. The final baiting area (which is one of the most difficult) will require 4 days of clear weather if this is going to be completed this season.

Any IAATO members wishing to follow the progress of this project are encouraged to refer to the regular newsletters, which are posted on the SGHT website.

Throughout the season the SGHT Museum staff have engaged with IAATO staff on visiting vessels to fundraise for this project and the efforts of the staff have been greatly appreciated.

- Interactions with IAATO vessels & impact of HR projects

It has been an extremely busy and demanding season for all the teams involved in habitat restoration work. GSGSSI wishes to thank IAATO members again for their assistance during this period, in particular for respecting closed areas and adjusting itineraries as necessary. It is hoped that clients and passengers appreciate the importance of these projects in the context of the highly significant contribution they will make to the future ecology of the island and through so doing, the contribution they have, in their own way, made to the success of these projects. In the majority of instances GSGSSI hopes that the disruption has been minimal, however, if any operators have any concerns or suggestions then GSGSSI would strongly encourage them to raise these.

The efforts of IAATO members to rigorously adhere to biosecurity measures have also been appreciated. The importance of maintaining the highest possible standards of biosecurity protocols cannot be stressed enough, particularly as ever increasing areas of the island are returned to their rodent free natural state. (Members should note that this is also legally binding under the Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance.)

- Next season's habitat restoration work.

The 2013/14 season should be less disruptive for visiting vessels. The second phase of the GSGSSI reindeer project, commencing in early 2014, will be limited to the Barff Peninsula. Operational plans have not yet been confirmed, but IAATO will be kept informed. During this period there will be some transient closures of sites between Cobblers Cove and Royal Bay. GSGSSI, will, however, work with project staff on the ground to try and minimise any disruption to projected visitor landings, particularly at key sites such as St Andrew's Bay.

There will not be any further SGHT rat eradication work (aerial baiting) carried out by the SGHT until early 2015.

## **Administrative points**

- Documentation updates

Following this meeting a number of documents will be updated and promulgated. These will include the Visit Application Form, Information for Visitors Booklet 2013, Visit Permit Holder Landing Declaration form, and the Tourism Management Policy document.

Operators will need to refer to these documents during the visit application process. These documents will also be updated on the GSGSSI website.

- Approved observer carriage

Following the 2012 IAATO meeting, the policy on the carriage of Approved GSGSSI Observers has been revised as follows:

1. Privately owned vessels carrying 11- 20 persons on board (including professional crew) may be permitted to land passengers at approved landing sites, but may only land at Specially Protected sites when accompanied by a GSGSSI approved observer to oversee landings.

Privately owned vessels carrying more than 20 persons on board (including professional crew) will only be permitted to land passengers at sites, other than Grytviken, if accompanied by a GSGSSI approved observer to oversee landings.

2. Under exceptional circumstances, commercial non-IAATO vessels may be given permission to visit South Georgia, if the visit is of a unique nature in support of a specific project, which will not involve the vessel returning to South Georgia at a later date.

All such vessels will either be required to carry a GSGSSI approved observer for the duration of the visit or the visit will need to be overseen by one of the listed IAATO Yacht Service Providers or Operators, noting that this oversight must include observer coverage for the duration of the visit by a suitably experienced IAATO Expedition Leader.

- Payment of invoices

Last season was the first time that the advance payment of 50% of projected landing fees (for vessels carrying more than 12 passengers) was a condition of the visit permit. Unfortunately applicants encountered problems when attempting to make these payments by electronic transfer. This process was handled within the Stanley Treasury where a payment instruction problem was subsequently identified. This has now been rectified. GSGSSI very much regrets the difficulties, which were encountered. Separately, operators are reminded that invoice payments need to be completed within the specified timelines.

Visitor fees will remain unaltered for the 2013/14 season and are not due to increase until July 2014. To assist with planning, confirmation of the revised visitor fee for the 2014/15 season will be communicated to IAATO members in the coming weeks.

- Legislative review

In the coming 12 months further progress is expected on legislative review work. It is hoped that this will include legislation, which will cover visitors to the Territory. This will involve a review of the existing policy followed by a period legislative drafting. IAATO and other stakeholders will be engaged during this process

## **Vessel access and major incident planning**

- Large vessel access

In 2008 a decision to limit access to IAATO category 1 & 2 vessels was taken. This decision was made for a number of reasons, not least of which was the findings of the 2006 National Audit Office report on the Overseas Territories, which identified visits to South Georgia by large cruise ships as being an area of risk with limited mitigating factors. Concern had also been raised that, following the implementation of the ban on heavy fuel oil in the Antarctic Treaty Area, SGSSI might experience an influx of very large vessels burning heavy fuel; vessels deemed to pose a significant environmental risk and contingent liability.

Since that decision was taken, the later concern has proved to be unfounded and significant progress has been made to improve the major incident response capability at King Edward Point.

For these reasons and following stakeholder engagement last year, the decision has been taken to permit IAATO Cruise Only (CR) category vessels, carrying up to a maximum of 850 passengers, to return to South Georgia and land passengers at Grytviken.

- Major Incident Planning

In recent years GSGSSI has made improvements to the basic response capability for an influx of stranded passengers at KEP, (though this should not be viewed as being comprehensive). Further to this, and noting that larger ships will in future have access to Grytviken, GSGSSI has initiated a works programme to restore and refurbish (in stages) the Nybrakka Barracks building in Grytviken. The Norwegian and UK Governments, as part of the Scott Amundsen anniversary agreement, which includes funding for heritage projects, are jointly funding this work. This particular project will have the dual benefit giving the structure a new lease of life and a new function as a shelter for a large influx of stranded passengers.

- Major incident plan review & study

GSGSSI is in the process of reviewing its Major Incident Plan and a table top exercise will be conducted at KEP in May. In conjunction with this, an academic review of the plan and perceived risks is being undertaken Lt Cdr Bill Dawson at the Mount Pleasant RCC. This project (which will form the basis of a Masters dissertation) will examine the risks surrounding cruise ship (and other vessel) operations in remote regions such as South Georgia. The assistance of IAATO members is requested in identifying industry perceptions of the risks surrounding visits to South Georgia.

This will involve an online survey / questionnaire over the next couple of months and an invitation to connect with Bill if members have a particular perspective, experience (case study) or view they would like to share along with an open invitation to discuss points arising from the survey.

GSGSSI strongly urges IAATO members (and particularly experienced vessel Masters and field staff) to participate in this process. This is an opportunity for IAATO members to highlight concerns and make proposals, which will be presented to GSGSSI.

## **January 2013 Inquest**

At last year's IAATO meeting, members were informed about the tragic death of Mrs Eileen Larrimore on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2012, who died as a result of injuries sustained following a fall from a cliff, whilst undertaking the Shackleton Walk between Fortuna Bay and Stromness. At that time of the meeting the inquest had been opened and adjourned, whilst the Coroner's Officers completed their investigations. In January 2013 the inquest reconvened and the Coroner subsequently delivered a narrative verdict. Any IAATO members wishing to receive a copy of the statement issued by the court should contact GSGSSI.

The IAATO meeting is also a timely opportunity to highlight the role of Her Majesty's Coroner with IAATO members. It is important for vessel operators and staff to remember that in the event of a death on South Georgia (or at sea in the immediate vicinity of the islands) the Government Officers should be notified and a report will be sent to HM Coroner (based in Stanley). Depending on the circumstances, the Coroner may request that the deceased is brought to Stanley, where the Coroner can then assume jurisdiction as HM Coroner for the Falkland Islands. An inquest may then be opened (possibly subject to the findings of a post mortem examination).

Following the delivery of the inquest verdict in January 2013 the Coroner wrote to the interested parties represented at the inquest hearing, including GSGSSI. In this letter he listed a number of specific findings and listed a number of recommended action points for GSGSSI to consider and address. The findings included the following points covering both the walk and the medical facilities on the vessel:

- The route being followed was not the official route detailed in the GSGSSI Site Visitor Management Plan (SVMP), a copy of which the walk leader had received.
- There had not been warnings given about the cliff, nor was a member of staff at that point to warn walkers
- There were concerns about the standard of medical attention given.

Notwithstanding the GSGSSI review of the SVMP, which was undertaken prior to the start of the 2012/13 season, (following the incident in Jan 2012), the Coroner has suggested that GSGSSI considers a number of specific comments and recommendations, which are summarised below:

HM Coroner's comments in respect of the Shackleton Walk:

- a) Staff involved in the oversight of the walk demonstrated uncertainty with regard to the SVMP issued by GSGSSI and in particular the official route.
- b) Concern was expressed about the dissemination of permit information from the company (applicant) to the staff on the vessel.
- c) Evidence that the route / walk leaders, who had passed the information to successive staff members, followed the unofficial route on a regular basis.
- d) Independently employed staff may be a contributing factor to the problems with the flow of communications from the company to the staff on the vessel.
- e) The following of official routes, which are as safe as circumstances can allow, is a major factor in preventing injuries or deaths.
- f) The fact that the unofficial route was still being taken in January 2013 (despite the distribution of a revised SVMP) was particularly concerning.

HM Coroner's suggested recommendations and actions:

- GSGSSI should improve the means by which the Government ensures that companies clearly understand the requirement to comply with all management plans.
- More emphasis should be given to safety (rather than environmental protection) when developing management plans.
- Revised or enhanced permitting procedures should be developed to ensure that applicants certify that all relevant documentation has been read, understood and that staff have been informed.
- A tougher approach from Government if permit conditions and management plans are not adhered to without good cause.
- Further revisions to the Shackleton Walk management plan to make this more forceful.



GSGSSI response and proposed actions (in respect of the Shackleton Walk):

1. Before the start of 2013/14 season, application and briefing documents will be reviewed and revised to ensure all staff are fully aware of all requisite information. This will include a revision of the Permit Holder Landing Declaration to include an explicit checklist and assurance that passengers have been advised about the medical evacuation limitations involved in visiting South Georgia.
2. Further revision of the SVMP in advance of the 2013/14 season, with an improved map and explicit instructions.
3. Raise directly with IAATO members the issue that, even in January 2013, it was still evident that staff were still not following the approved route, noting the Coroner's suggestion that there should be tougher policing by GSGSSI.
4. Tougher policing will involve increased monitoring of landings and use of observers. Failure to adhere to permit conditions could result in operators losing the dispensation not to make their first landing at King Edward Point for briefings (regardless of the Permit Holders experience on paper). In extreme cases consideration would be given to revoking a visit permit.
5. GSGSSI to establish a review panel to include representatives from both GSGSSI and IAATO (and other independent experts), to review existing activities and management arrangements (in particular extended walks) and make recommendations.

HM Coroner's comments & suggestions in respect of medical facilities:

- a) Evidence suggested that treatment did not follow recognised trauma care protocols and that the doctor's spoken English was also limited.
- b) Concerns were raised about the medical supplies held on board and the medical provision provided for in the sub-charter, despite the remote nature of South Georgia and lack of SAR cover.
- c) A review of on board medical capabilities would be beneficial, with the establishment of minimum industry standards, (fully disclosed to passengers).
- d) Whilst Mrs Larrimore's injuries were fatal, a more specialist doctor with the correct equipment would be better able to save a life in similar circumstances.

- e) Concerns were raised over the on board protocols for dealing with incidents and the doctor's lack of appreciation and awareness regarding the logistical limitations. Pre planning is essential.
- f) GSGSSI should engage with IAATO to reaffirm the limited medical facilities on South Georgia and the requirement for self-reliance, whilst engaging with experts to consider what improvements or minimum standards should apply. This should be reflected in the vessel's contingency plans.
- g) GSGSSI to consider whether provision of a minimum standard of medical care should be a condition of permit.

GSGSSI response and proposed actions (in respect of medical facilities):

- 1) GSGSSI and IAATO to engage a medical specialist (possibly a former British Antarctic Survey Medical Unit (BASMU) KEP doctor) to conduct a review (to be peer reviewed) of current capabilities and medical arrangements on visiting ships.
- 2) For the 2013/14 season visit applicants will be required to provide details of vessel medical facilities and also the capabilities of the doctor.
- 3) GSGSSI to revise the SGSSI PVR to record all injuries.
- 4) GSGSSI to engage BASMU to discuss the role of the KEP doctor and the degree to which assistance should be made available.

GSGSSI will be working closely with the IAATO Executive on these issues in the coming year. GSGSSI will update members as necessary on progress throughout the year and at next year's meeting.

April 2013

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Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands