

Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Presentation to IAATO members May 2011

It has been a busy year in South Georgia and events over the last season have lead to some very positive developments as well as other new challenges to be addressed by the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) in the coming months.

General Visitor Overview

The number of vessel visits and visitor numbers declined during the 2010/11 season. This was an expected trend following the global financial downturn and the departure from the region of a number of longstanding visiting vessels. This season's reduction in visits was compounded further by 5 cancellations, following various vessel incidents and other developments within the industry. Cruise ship visitor numbers overall fell from the previous season by 1860 to 5354, following a drop in vessel visits from 63 to 46. Yacht numbers dropped slightly to 18 visits (78 passengers), though the number of commercial passenger yacht charters (9) remained the same.

Habitat Restoration Project

It has been a particularly exciting recent few months on South Georgia, which have culminated in the South Georgia Heritage Trust's (SGHT) completion of Phase 1 of their South Georgia Habitat Restoration (SGHR) project. The aim of the SGHT project is to eradicate rats from the whole of South Georgia, over a number of seasons, by the aerial dispersal of poisoned bait. Phase 1 was in many respects a trial phase for future years and this mostly targeted land in the general vicinity of Grytviken. The project commenced at the beginning of March and the SGHR team was fortunate to have some very fine weather, which enabled them to make very good progress. It is hoped that this tremendous achievement will ultimately prove to be successful and will contribute significantly to the Government's overarching long term objective of achieving wide-scale habitat restoration for the whole island, including the removal of all invasive mammals, and key invasive plants.

The completion of this first phase of the Trust's SGHR project would not have been possible without the support of IAATO and in particular assistance from One Ocean Expeditions, who carried both of the Trust's Bolkow 105 helicopters to South Georgia early this year. Throughout this period the GSGSSI has been heavily committed to administering the authorisations and permitting necessary for the project to proceed, whilst also providing logistical assistance and support for the carriage of bait, stores and personnel as well as providing maritime SAR cover in remote areas. GSGSSI's sincere thanks go to all IAATO members who have assisted with the movement of staff during this season, not just in direct support of the SGHR Project, but also with the carriage of other passengers for other projects. Given the pressure to accommodate passengers on Government vessels, other important projects would not otherwise have been completed, had it not been for the support from IAATO vessels. Our thanks go to all the vessel operators involved and those who also offered to assist.

A separate presentation will be given on behalf of the SGHT, detailing their progress with the South Georgia Habitat Restoration project, but to date both the Trust and GSGSSI have been very pleased with the progress made this season. The area baited in this first Phase was the largest ever in a single operation (12,500 hectares, from a total of 80,000 across the whole island which must be baited.) This area included all of the Greene, Thatcher and Mercer peninsulas (within Cumberland Bay) as well as Saddle Island in the northwest of the main island, which had been rat free until rats from the main island reached it within the last decade. Having successfully completed the first phase of aerial baiting the effort must now shift to monitoring work to establish if this has successfully eradicated rats in these areas, whilst also starting work on the planning for the next phases of the project, which the SGHT has now committed to take forward.

The next phase of the project is due to commence in February 2013. During the intervening period GSGSSI will be working hard to monitor the success of the first phase, including undertaking a detailed study of the rat genetics within the existing populations. This will serve to ensure that the current methodology is vindicated and that the target populations in the other proposed baiting areas are all genetically distinct, a key prerequisite for the success of the project. It will then also enable the Government to ascertain if any future re-invasion of rodents stems from a new introduction or an existing residual population. Monitoring will continue across the Phase 1 area to look for any signs of rats, but all involved hope that we shall soon start to see South Georgia pipits, prions and burrowing petrels successfully breeding and rearing young to fledge around the shores of Cumberland Bay in the areas, which have been baited.

Throughout the aerial baiting operation the GSGSSI managed to retain access for visitors to much of Grytviken, including the cemetery, church and museum. No problems were encountered with the management of the closed area around the helicopter landing site. However, GSGSSI would still welcome any feedback from operators on how this visitor site was managed during the course of the operation and whether it could be improved.

Biosecurity

Biosecurity and the rigorous application of the biosecurity protocols are now more important than ever, during the course of landings at Grytviken and Maiviken, which must now be treated as rat free areas. GSGSSI staff and Government Officers will be monitoring these protocols and conducting inspections during the course of landings. Any suggestions for revisions to the existing measures are always welcome. GSGSSI has also prepared response plans so that the staff at KEP can respond rapidly in the event that there is ever any report or risk of a rodent reintroduction. A local programme of site monitoring for any evidence of rats is now also in place.

Consideration must now also be given to the future management of landings at other approved sites as the habitat restoration process progresses in future years and increasing areas of the South Georgia coastline are designated as rat free, a status that currently denotes a site as being a Specially Protected Area.

(The designation of this status will need to be reviewed when the Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance becomes law and status of areas classed as Specially Protected will be need to be re-defined.)

It is highly likely that visits will need to be coordinated to avoid unnecessary movement between rat free and rat infested sites as the number of rat free areas increase and ultimately, a revised policy and procedure will need to be in place to manage visits to a whole rat free island. IAATO members are urged to discuss this during the course of this meeting. At this juncture there is no suggestion of closing any sites. It will be necessary though to review how visits are undertaken and the measures, which need to be in place to ensure that every possible action is taken to mitigate against the possible risk of a rat or mouse being re-introduced to a rat free area. IAATO will be fully engaged throughout this process and GSGSSI intends to establish a working group of international experts to review the existing biosecurity measures and landing arrangements and advise on the future management of all visitors to the island. IAATO will be fully involved in this process.

Habitat Restoration and other Environmental Issues

Reindeer

The biosecurity initiatives outlined must be viewed in the context of an overarching Government policy of Habitat Restoration for the whole island. This also includes other animals and plants, which are responsible for, or have the potential to cause wide scale habitat destruction. In some instances the management of one species has a direct bearing on the management issues affecting another non-native species. Reindeer are one such species and have long been identified as being responsible for habitat destruction across their current range. What is also apparent is that the eradication of rats cannot take place in the presence of reindeer and the range of the animals is likely to increase as glaciers across the island continue to retreat at alarming rates; potentially providing reindeer with access to new foraging areas. In September 2010, Darren Christie, the GSGSSI Environmental Officer, published his literature review and discussion document on the future management of the reindeer. (This document is available on the GSGSSI website.) There then followed a stakeholder meeting in London (to which IAATO was invited) to discuss the findings of this document and the future management options facing the Government. The consensus of the stakeholders was that the reindeer should be removed from South Georgia. Working groups were then established to consider the methodology for the removal of reindeer and the associated science, which should be undertaken in conjunction with this process. Both working groups are making good progress and they are due to report to GSGSSI later this year. GSGSSI will keep IAATO advised of the outcome of this process and engage the IAATO Executive as necessary to ensure that any potential tourism management issues are addressed.

Bittercress

Efforts are also ongoing to eradicate invasive plants including bittercress, which has become established around King Edward Cove. Last season visiting ship's Expedition Leaders (EL's) were provided with information detailing areas, which

are closed and our thanks go to all the staff involved in ensuring that visitors did not enter these areas. GSGSSI also engaged the services of a plant eradication specialist from the New Zealand based company, Wildlife Management International, and excellent progress has been made in controlling the spread of this (and other invasive plant species at Grytviken) with a view to ultimately eradicating them. The Government Officers have been working extremely hard to maintain this control regime and in the coming years GSGSSI will be seeking funding to maintain the momentum of the progress made this season.

Marine Environmental Monitoring and protection

Regular visitors to South Georgia will be aware how the terrestrial environment is changing, and GSGSSI is also concerned about the Marine Environment. In collaboration with BAS, GSGSSI is working with a sense of urgency to improve our baseline knowledge of the sensitive benthic environment, before significant changes take place. To this end, funding from the Darwin Initiative was sourced last season to support a dive survey by the Falkland Islands based Shallow Marine Survey Group along the north coast of the Island. The methodology was consistent with similar baseline surveys in the Falklands and large volumes of data are now being studied and recorded. GSGSSI is conscious that IAATO vessels are amongst those, which annually operate in the high latitudes of both hemispheres. If there are any IAATO vessel operators, which would be interested in funding or assisting with invasive species research, please could they contact GSGSSI. Considering that invasive species have the potential to dramatically disrupt marine ecology, and that we know relatively little about the South Georgia sub-littoral and intertidal marine ecosystems, any assistance with baseline data would be greatly appreciated. This is particularly important as South Georgia is potentially an 'edge of range' region for many species, and there is a great deal of work that should be done in this area including studies to establish baseline data. GSGSSI would also be very keen to engage visitors who dive and may be able to provide high quality geo-referenced photographs.

Chinstrap penguin mortalities

In November GSGSSI was disappointed to receive information that sick and dying chinstrap penguins had been observed in Cooper Bay. (The site had only recently been declared open to visitors again following the outbreak of avian cholera in 2004/5.) The reports received suggested that the birds were again suffering from avian cholera and the site and immediate surrounding area were immediately closed. GSGSSI's thanks go to Jerome Poncet and the crew of the GOLDEN FLEECE for bringing this to the attention of GSGSSI. The site will remain closed for the immediate future and this will be reviewed in the coming seasons.

Heavy Fuel Oil

GSGSSI remains concerned about the scale of the environmental impact that a Heavy Fuel Oil (HFO) spill would have on the South Georgia coastal environment. The island is a habitat for millions of seabirds and mammals as well as supporting globally significant populations of endangered albatross species, which the Government is legally bound to protect. GSGSSI is also aware of the

potential for vessels (in general), which may in the future be excluded from the Antarctic, opting to transfer their operations to South Georgia waters.

A stakeholder consultation on the future management options facing GSGSSI was undertaken last September. Options considered ranged from not implementing any form of ban to fully implementing a ban within SGSSI Territorial Waters in line with the MARPOL Annex 1 amendment, or alternatively implementing the ban whilst facilitating some degree of limited access for HFO use and carriage in Cumberland East Bay for a limited time frame. This would provide some existing vessel operations with time to make the operational modifications necessary in order to meet the requirements of a ban.

The majority of the respondents were in favour of a ban on the use and carriage of HFO within SGSSI Territorial waters. However, it was also apparent that all the cruise ships now visiting South Georgia meet the conditions of the MARPOL amendment. Therefore, for the present, GSGSSI intends to restrict (through licence conditions) the movements of any other vessels, which do not meet this standard, to Cumberland East Bay only and not permit them access to any of the other more remote and sensitive visitor sites.

Administration

The Visitor Fee structure remains as detailed at last year's meeting. This information is detailed in the Information for Visitors to South Georgia booklet (which can be downloaded from the Government's website.) The key points to remember are that the basic visitor fee for the coming season for the first 3 days of a visit remains at £105 per person. Visitors intending to stay more than 3 days (72 hrs from arrival) will be charged an additional 50% (£52.50). This will cover a visit of up to one calendar month (i.e. 20th November – 19th December), at which point visitors are charged again as if for a new visit. This fee structure applies to all visitors (as detailed in the Tourism Management Policy), regardless of whether they are cruise ship or yacht borne.

The only planned revisions to the Harbour dues relate to yachts. It is proposed that the current description of what constitutes a yacht will be redefined to cover vessels no more than 25m in length (to be confirmed). The fixed yacht fee of £60 will apply to all such vessels. Standard harbour dues will be applied to all other vessels (which exceed this length.) Comments from IAATO members are welcomed and members will be notified when this revised structure is implemented.

Vessel operators are also reminded to update the information provided to their EL's and the IAATO executive will be informed when the updated documents are placed on the Government's website prior to the start of the season.

A new visitor briefing DVD (2010) is in circulation, and all EL's should be showing this to visitors. If staff require new copies of this they should contact either GSGSSI or their agents in Stanley. A South Georgia iPod application will soon be available and GSGSSI also intends to provide the existing Site Visitor

Management Plans to EL's as iPod applications. (IAATO members will be provided with a password to download these from the GSGSSI website.)

GSGSSI will continue to provide observer coverage on all new vessels and vessels operated by new operators during the course of their first visit.

Members should also be aware that with the future introduction of the Polar Code and following improvements at King Edward Point to GSGSSI's major incident response stores, GSGSSI is considering permitting again visits to Grytviken by vessels larger than IAATO Category II ships. At this juncture an upper limit on passenger capacity is still under review, but IAATO members are encouraged to contact GSGSSI if they wish to enquire further.

The Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance is expected to come into force in the next few weeks. This is later than GSGSSI had wished for, but it is nevertheless a very positive step in providing a legal framework to protect the Territory's wildlife and environment. Coupled with this, GSGSSI has also had to introduce Prohibited Areas legislation to enforce the 200m safety exclusion zone around the former whaling stations, following repeated incursions by visitors into these closed and extremely dangerous areas, contrary to the conditions of their permit to visit. Any staff who need to refer to this legislation should do so on the Government's website.

Compliance issues

There were 3 notable compliance issues last season, all of which were investigated; appropriate action was taken and resulting lessons learned.

In the first instance a group of passengers visiting Stromness (following the Shackleton hike) deliberately ignored the explicit instructions of their Expedition Leader and entered the prohibited area around the former whaling station. This incident was reported to the GO's by the EL, a fact which was acknowledged by GSGSSI. This demonstrated a responsible professional approach on the part of the EL. GSGSSI and the vessel operator then examined the circumstances of the incident to ensure that those involved were identified and understood the risks to which they been exposed, through their deliberate actions to ignore the instructions which they had received. This brought under scrutiny the whole issue of managed 'free roaming' by visitors. If this is to be managed effectively, staff must be able to observe all passengers to such a degree that they are always able to intervene to prevent inappropriate behaviour. This means ensuring there are adequate capable staff on the ground and that the area in question is manageable. A new Prohibited Areas Ordinance has been enacted, following a succession of incursions inside the 200m safety exclusion limit around the whaling stations (in particular Stromness.) This incident was referred to the Government's Attorney General's Chambers. In this instance no legal action was taken as the operator had responded swiftly and appropriately to incident, having previously made every reasonable effort to ensure that all passengers had been appropriately briefed. All visitors should be aware though, that if the Government's legal advice is to pursue a prosecution, then GSGSSI will not hesitate to do so.

The issue of free roaming was raised again in the case of an incident involving the filming of an elephant seal pup and inappropriate visitor behaviour including physical contact with the animal. This incident was made even worse by the fact that it was posted on the internet website You Tube, which can only serve to encourage such behaviour and undermine the efforts of Government and the industry to manage landings responsibly. The main concern in this case was the length of time during which the filming took place without any form of intervention by staff. The operator was, however, acknowledged for bringing the matter directly to the attention of the GSGSSI and for conducting a thorough internal enquiry and then presenting the following recommendations to GSGSSI to prevent any reoccurrence.

Expedition Leaders must:

- i) Assess wildlife density and adjust the roaming area accordingly.
- ii) Reinforce the key point that staff must immediately intervene when necessary (and there may be some visitors who will always attempt to ignore the instructions they have been given.)
- iii) Brief thoroughly all passengers concerning weaned elephant seal pup behaviour and how they should respond.

GSGSSI was satisfied with this response, but still required the vessel to make its first landing at Grytviken during its subsequent visit. A GSGSSI Government Officer was then embarked as an observer to monitor the staff management of visitor landings. His observations did not identify any areas of concern.

The action taken by the operator in this instance highlights the importance of staff reporting all incidents to GSGSSI. If problems arise they must not be overlooked. Only through a joint approach from GSGSSI and IAATO can these issues be resolved. (A similar issue previously came to the fore when staff encountered difficulties landing passengers outside the 200m safety limit at Stromness. Only when this was brought to the attention of GSGSSI was it possible for the issue to be addressed and a workable solution found. If staff encounter any problems or have any concerns during the course of landings then they must bring these to the attention of GSGSSI as soon as possible.)

GSGSSI's principle concern remains the fact that the expedition staff managing passenger landings in general and free roaming in particular must be able to adequately observe all the passengers and intervene as soon as any inappropriate behaviour is identified. IAATO vessels are afforded exclusive access to South Georgia and as well as following the South Georgia visitor wild life protection measures, IAATO's own guidelines must be adhered to at all times. It is important that minimum staff numbers ashore must not be gauged purely on the basis on maintaining the correct ratio of staff to passengers. The staff must all be capable and confident to intervene as necessary, otherwise the

projected minimum staffing levels and ratios of staff to passengers are of little consequence.

The final incident involved the export, without permit, of 54 fur seal teeth (and some other bones) by a passenger off an IAATO yacht. These items were intercepted by customs officers in the Falkland Islands and returned to the GSGSSI. The yacht operator has lost their dispensation not to have to land first at Grytviken for their next visit and GSGSSI observer coverage will be required for all or part of their next visit to South Georgia to assess their operation and supervision of their passengers. Had the Wildlife and Protected Areas Legislation been in force, it is likely that GSGSSI would have sought a prosecution.

Whaling station surveys

In November 2010 GSGSSI commissioned a further survey of the former whaling stations at Husvik, Stromness, Leith and Prince Olav. This was undertaken to re-assess the asbestos contamination and ensure that the existing management regime (and 200m safety exclusion zone) remains appropriate and adequate to protect visitors. A structural survey of the stations was also undertaken to assess the current state of the remaining buildings and their cultural heritage value, providing guidance to GSGSSI on their future management.

The asbestos survey was lead by Tommy Moore of Thames Laboratories (GSGSSI's UK asbestos consultants) and Michael Morrison of Purcell Miller and Tritton historic buildings consultants undertook the structural survey and assessment of the current heritage value. It is very clear that there is no quick solution when it comes to the long term management options for the former whaling stations, and even in the case of Grytviken, which has had all hazardous materials and buildings removed, GSGSSI is now facing a long term and expensive management programme.

With regard to asbestos and the general safety of the structures in the former whaling stations (other than Grytviken), it was immediately apparent to the surveyors that the 200m safety limit is appropriate and should remain in place. Not only is asbestos still a hazard, but also the structures themselves are increasingly dangerous. All IAATO members should refer to the relevant Prohibited Areas Ordinance. Note that this area includes the Manager's Villa at Husvik. GSGSSI hopes that it will be possible to take remedial action to this structure to enable future access under permit to this building, (though not the rest of the Husvik Station.)

IAATO members are encouraged to attend a South Georgia Industrial Heritage conference in Dundee from 7-9 September 2011, which is being organised by the SGHT. This will include a presentation by Michael Morrison on the findings of his survey. Please contact either GSGSSI or the SGHT (info@sght.org) for further information.

General Works

Over the past year the hydro-electric supply has been providing continuous power to the base and GSGSSI hopes to be able soon to augment the final remaining oil fired boilers at KEP with an electric one, which will effectively bring to an end the burning of fossil fuel on the base on a day to day basis.

GSGSSI has also refurbished the Grytviken Drukken Villa to provide accommodation for museum staff and the Government continues to finance the running of the museum and the maintenance and upkeep of all the other museum buildings at Grytviken.

Work has also been undertaken at KEP to refurbish the old gaol (the oldest building in the site.) This now houses all of the Government's major incident stores. Over the last year a review of the Territory's major incident plan has been undertaken and this has included improving the capability of the staff at KEP to manage a major incident, whilst also increasing the frequency of exercises. An exercise was undertaken last November, which involved the IAATO executive and a further exercise is planned for later this year, prior to the start of the season.

The Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands wishes to thank IAATO again for the opportunity to address your members directly. The Government also appreciates the efforts of the IAATO Executive and members to maintain a sound working relationship with GSGSSI, ensuring that we continue to engage thoroughly and all issues arising in a positive and constructive manner. GSGSSI particularly appreciated IAATO's inclusion of a South Georgia section of the new field staff training assessment and the direct engagement with Kim Crosbie on the content of this section. GSGSSI hopes that this will prove to be a very successful initiative for IAATO and GSGSSI.