

Advocating for Antarctic Wilderness: Short-term Visits and Human Values

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Abstract—This research examined the nature of experience for visitors to the Ross Sea Region (RSR) of Antarctica. By monitoring visitors before, during, and after their onsite visit, using a mixed methodology approach, several interesting themes have arisen. In terms of advocacy, are we preaching to the converted? Is advocacy the awareness or the action? How do we adequately measure such aspects? Do we mean action or intent? Are we looking for action in an Antarctic sense or more generally? While presenting the visitor situation in the RSR and the context of this study, these questions are a few posed and discussed within related literature.

Introduction

Tourism and leisure in remote locations is sometimes seen as a valuable commodity, not only in terms of economic benefits, but also due to the expectation that these visitors become advocates for that environment or setting. One area where this is particularly noted is Antarctica; experience and learning are on offer as tour operators “show [Antarctica] to people who go on to be advocates for protecting Antarctica” (Rodney Russ, as quoted by Janes 2003: D3).

Exploratory findings indicate that perhaps the case is not as one might hypothesize. One feature of the experience, seems to be highly weighted towards personal growth, a reflection on home, and a “Gee, if I can get to Antarctica, then I can do anything” mentality. Although in complete awe of Antarctica’s landscape and wildlife, visitor advocacy appears to be towards Antarctica just being there, and not necessarily being closed off for preservation. Finally, an appreciation for the past (exploration) and the present (science) seems to evolve. With the majority of research into visitation emphasizing the impact on the environment, host societies and/or the economy, a better understanding of the subtleties of the experience and its impact on the visitor plays an increasingly critical role for sound management.

Antarctica: The Ross Sea Region

Antarctica and the surrounding ocean cover millions of km², the continent alone is 14 million km² (5,405,430 miles²)

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or the size of the United States and Mexico combined (Cessford 1997). As described in numerous sources, Antarctica is a continent of superlatives: the coldest, the windiest, the highest, and the most remote continent, but also surrounded by the stormiest ocean.

To conduct research on this type of geographical scale would have been far beyond the boundaries of this project, so the work was contained within the Ross Sea Region (RSR). The standard physical boundaries for the RSR, as defined by Huston and Waterhouse (2002), are shown in figure 1. This is essentially a section of a pie from the South Pole to 60°S, bounded by approximately 150°E and 150°W. The region is historically claimed by New Zealand as the Ross Dependency, and is the “far side” of the continent from the Antarctic Peninsula that continues south from South America. In the past, eight expeditions were active in the region during the Heroic Era of exploration (1895–1917), leaving behind huts and a legacy of the “race” to the South Pole. Today the national programs of Italy, New Zealand, and the United States share responsibility for organizing and conducting the majority of science activities in the region.

Visitors

The working definition used in this research was to define visitors as those who come into physical contact with the continent (inclusive of Ross Island), but also whose primary activity and purpose is simply “being there,” in other words, experiencing the continent or understanding the work that occurs. These visitors may be visiting for their own leisure motivations, as is the case with commercial tourists, or visiting for the greater society, as is the case with media and government officials.

Technically, everyone in Antarctica is a visitor, as there is no indigenous population. However, visitors are typically equated with tourists, “visitors who are not affiliated in an official capacity with an established National Antarctic program. They include both fare-paying passengers...and private expedition members and adventurers aboard seaborne vessels or aircraft” (Enzenbacher 1993: 142). Different organizations and researchers define the term “tourist” according to their own criteria and agenda, and even among the recognized tourist population aboard ships, Zehnders (1990) prefers to call their company’s passengers “travelers” because of their philosophical values and sophistication.

As on the Antarctic Peninsula, the main source of visitors to the RSR is through commercial tourism. A total of 13,263 ship borne tourists landed in Antarctica during the 2002/2003 season (IAATO 2006). The difference in numbers between the Ross Sea Region and the Antarctic Peninsula is dramatic and illustrated by the fact that of these 13,263 ship borne tourists, only 314 traveled to the Ross Sea Region

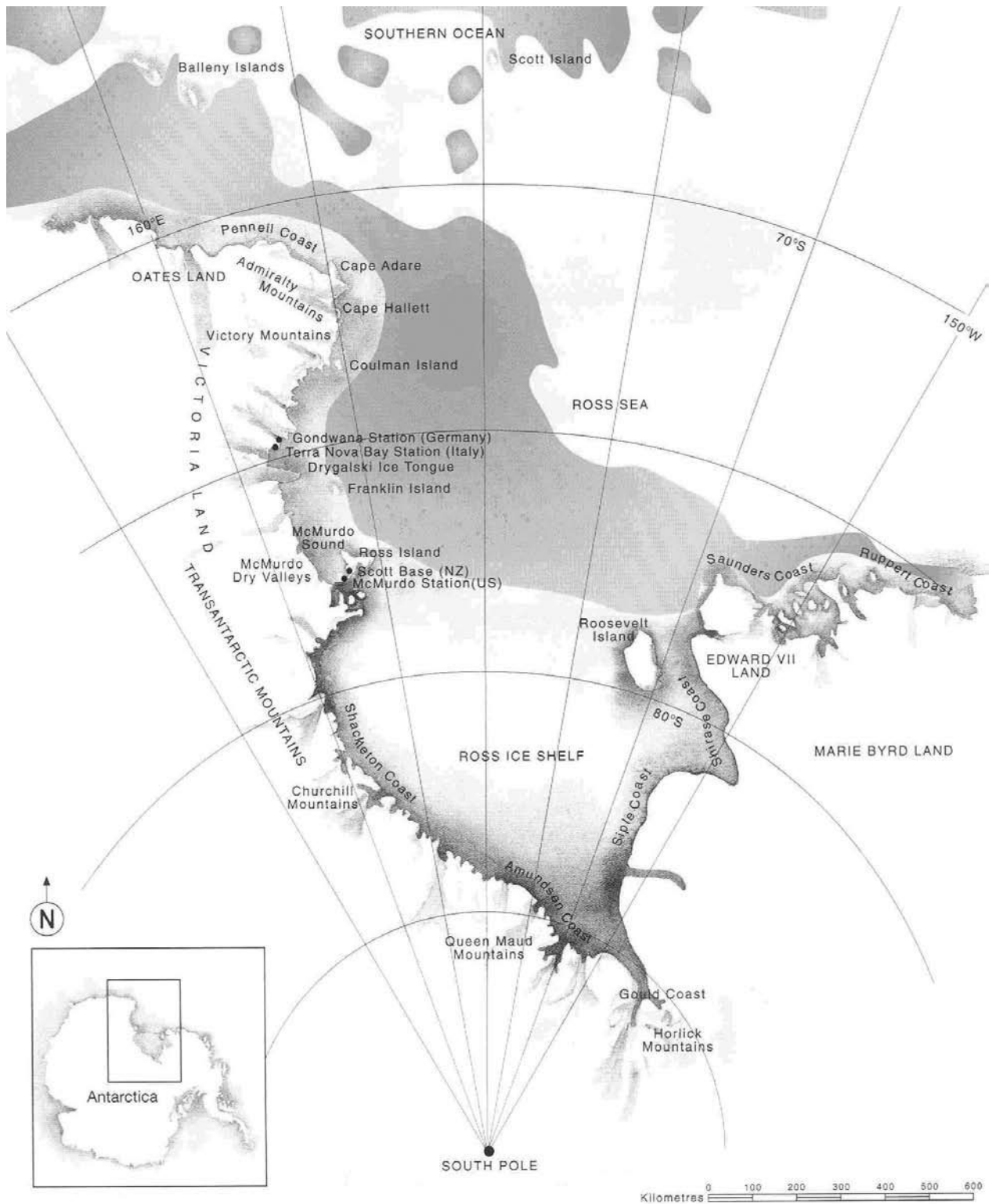


Figure 1—The Ross Sea Region (source: Huston & Waterhouse 2002: 2).

(IAATO 2006). In the RSR, “non-tourist” visitors arrive in small numbers through the artists, writers, media, and education programs offered by the national Antarctic programs of New Zealand and the United States. There are also invited, influential guests and an even smaller number of yachts and adventurers who visit the RSR on occasion. A profile of visitors who participated in the initial anticipation survey of this research is as follows:

- Total visitors, 87, spread proportionally among four groups, dependent on actual starting size; in other words, where one company had 250 participants, and another had only 20, their relative numbers in the total is proportional.
- Mean age, 54, spread between 21 and 75.
- Slightly more female respondents.
- Very well educated—82 percent had completed tertiary degrees, with 43 percent having a graduate degree.
- Varied occupations, but many professionals or retired.
- Mean income NZ \$116,447—spread predominantly by group based on facts such as retired professionals tended to travel with the commercial tour operators, while students were with the educational provider.
- Some visitors were very well traveled, others with no experience in cold or remote regions—for one it was the first time they had ever been “overseas.”
- Little previous Antarctic experience.
- Fifty-one percent from New Zealand—skewed because of the two NZ specific programs involved.
- Seventy-two percent stayed more than 21 days—based largely on the logistics of the travel to and from the RSR.

Using the term “visitor” to include those traveling to the RSR for the purposes of education or work and for reasons not related to Antarctic science or logistics was considered appropriate following past discussion (see Bauer 2001; Enzenbacher 1993; Maher and others 2003). The term “visitor,” as is used here, excludes all personnel carrying out nationally sponsored scientific research, or those providing logistical support for such research. It also excludes those individuals on over-flights, a group typically deemed to be tourists, but who never touch down on the continent and, as such, have an undefined impact on the physical environment.

This research has chosen to use the term “visitor,” as the overarching purpose of the project was examining experience and the potential of benefits arising from such experience. As expanded upon by Davis (1995: 3), “the use of the word ‘visitor’ rather than ‘tourist’ reflects [a] distinction... although tourists are included under the heading of visitors [in some definitions], the term ‘tourist’ is common in Antarctic literature. It is rejected here because it carries with it the economic implications of the tourist industry instead of the considerations of conservation.” The real concern for Davis (1995: 47) is “to ensure that visitors, tour operators, and staff understand and respect [Antarctica’s] wilderness values.” Using the arguments of Davis (1995) to further justify use of the term “visitor,” is done so because it is potentially more appropriate to place this work alongside research regarding wilderness management than the “business” of tourism.

Study Approach: Theory and Methodology

In reviewing Antarctic tourism literature, Mason and Legg (1999: 81) noted several topic areas that need to be addressed, one of these being “the quality of the tourist experience.” This need is also echoed in the writing of other Antarctic tourism researchers (see Davis 1995; Tracey 2001), yet examination of experience has still been limited. Hemmings and Roura (2003) recently stated that tourism is becoming a blurry subject and thus the experience is becoming further diversified, but still, what is this experience? Primarily, studies that have given attention to tourists’ experiences in Antarctica have reported their experience as summary motivations, image or satisfaction while already onsite; either at the beginning and/or end of the tourist’s voyage (see Bauer 2001; Cessford and Dingwall 1996).

Previous studies have also been primarily focused on issues relating to visitor management or documentation (Davis 1995; Enzenbacher 1995; Tracey 2001), with only two of these having empirically examined the social psychological side of the tourist, as somewhat of a tangent to their primary research (see Davis 1995; Enzenbacher 1995). Regardless of how many studies have examined parts of the experience, none have fully conceptualized visitors’ responses in combination with how they envisioned the trip or behaved while there, and thus have done little to touch upon the visitor’s advocacy, or potential advocacy, despite the wide-ranging anecdotal discussion on such subjects.

With experience painted in a “broad” brush stroke, Tracey’s (2001: 380) work sums up the situation:

The visitor must form a primary consideration in any system. Tourists represent an important group of the global public for whose good the resource is being managed, and, in the absence of direct mechanisms for public consultation in ATS matters, the rights and interests of tourism users should be taken into account. Ignoring the desires of tourists when developing a system could lead to provisions that are unrealistic or unworkable, and to a greater potential for non-compliance. Visitors also influence decision makers. A good understanding of the visitor experience and visitor motivations can provide an indication of demand, and help forecasting change.

The links between studying wilderness and wilderness values in Antarctica are also well documented (see Cessford 1997; Dingwall 1997; Summerson and Riddle 2000). Elaborating on the messages of early wilderness writers, McDonough and Braungart (2002: 34) believe “wild spaces are sacred, and even infrequent pilgrimages to see them can inspire a sense of wonder and a reverence for life.” Amy (2002: 167) continues by saying that “extreme landscape is able to flush out memories and then activate them within us to the point of letting them influence our experiences.” Figure 2 is a picture literally worth a thousand words, as much discussion of this life-changing experience has been expressed as shown by the cartoon.

Previous studies of the leisure and tourism experience have argued that the experience should not be considered as one-dimensional, but a multi-phase entity. Specifically,



Figure 2—The visitors' experience? (Source: New Zealand Antarctic Society 2003.) (Printed with permission; Bizarro by Dan Piraro © 1997.)

that experience 'onsite' interacts with many pre-visit (anticipation) and post-visit (recollection) factors. Potentially advancing the work of Driver and Tocher (1979) as well as Clawson and Knetsch (1966), Beedie and Hudson's (2003) model of adventure tourism in mountain locations conceptualized 'extraordinary experience.' Although not empirically tested, this model describes a continuum of recreational experience based on how mountains may act as a 'special place away from home' with a series of transitions. Aspects

of this model include the taking in of an urban 'frame,' which would include worrying, preparation and assessing the risk, and leaving with a mountain 'frame' filled with celebration, reflection, relaxation, and consolidation.

Arnould and Price (1993) also use the terminology "extraordinary experience" to describe a newness of perception and process gained from recreational experiences. In defining extraordinary experience, Arnould and Price (1993) advocate that the experience gained by a participant

must be triggered by unusual events and does not necessarily have to imply superior levels of effort. Abrahams (1986) recognizes that experiences, no matter how extraordinary, are in fact made up of a number of ordinary acts, and perhaps through the discipline of anthropology needs to look at the way they coexist.

While several authors have presented a five-phase model (Arnould and Price 1993; Clawson and Knetsch 1966; Fridgen 1984), a three-phase model has been alluded to by Bauer (2001). Bauer's (2001) model is in an Antarctic context, incorporating travel to and from the site with the onsite phase. Three phases would be congruent with Beedie and Hudson's (2003) model and as Driver and Tocher's (1979) research involves a continuum, any number of phases could be present.

A three-part methodology was thus used to examine a cycle of experience, comparing groups of visitors through this cycle, and analyzing change or transition as a result (see Maher 2004, 2005a). This research examined particular phases of the experience: (1) anticipation of the visit, (2) onsite during the visit, and (3) upon return home after the visit. Using the definition of visitor presented earlier, those included in the research were commercial tourists, as well as media, artists and writers, distinguished government and industry leaders, and those visiting through educational programs. Four organizations (two ship-based tour operators, one national Antarctic Program, and one tertiary education provider) assisted with their visitors' voluntary participation and with a number of data gathering methods during the 2002/2003 season. Methods included: (1) self-administered surveys sent to the respondent's home (up to 3 months in advance of the trip); (2) writing personal narratives or journals while on the trip (regardless of trip length: 4 to 28 days); (3) in-depth interviews held directly before and/or after the trip when possible; and (4) email-surveys post-visit (2 to 3 months after). In the 2003/2004 season, supplemental data were also collected, which included a familiarization trip to New Zealand's Scott Base and subsequent participant observation, and informal interviews held there.

Values—Before, During, and After

While the preceding sections have outlined the context and approaches used in this research, discussion of values will now focus on the research results. Keeping in mind the visitors and the RSR, what significant data have been uncovered? What do visitors have to say with regards to their experience and the possibility for advocacy?

To complete the baseline picture of visitors it is important to note that in terms of conservation or environmental membership, attributes typically linked to advocacy, 76 percent of respondents had no such membership prior to their visit.

Motivations for undertaking the visit were highly focused on such aspects as the scenery, remoteness, and wildlife, but also on the opportunities for education, dreams, and adventure. Mood appears to ebb and flow throughout the experience, but is generally positive. Any negative comments, dealing with misery or frustration are always clarified as relating to uncomfortable airforce plane seats or the numerous days at sea.

In relation to visitation, 72 percent of respondents believed it both harms and supports the continent, with 64 percent of these believing that the support for Antarctica outweighs any negative impacts.

Increasing people's awareness through personal experience is an effective way to promote knowledge and enhance people's conservation values.

If personnel (tourists) are adequately educated prior and during their trip to Antarctica (re: conservation, how to act around wildlife etc), tourism can be very beneficial and promotes important issues, (re: Antarctica and conservation).

The more people who experience the Antarctic, the more people will appreciate its uniqueness and will want to ensure it remains as unspoiled as possible.

Throughout the anticipation surveys, there is a noticeable critical awareness of issues related to the RSR and Antarctica, in general. This is likely a result of the fact that going to this location has been a life-long dream in many cases, and so visitors' reading and research has been extensive.

Once in the RSR, it appears that the experience is always a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. These are the experiences that the operators and organizations design them to be, and the ones that statements about advocacy are thus based on.

Arriving in Antarctica, I am jumping up and down with excitement.

My first impression of Antarctica—wonder, awe. So much beauty and so clear—a magic day. Unbelievable.

... unforgettable. ... could spend the rest of my life trying to reproduce that feeling. The vastness was astonishing. ... I had an immediate feeling of elation and delight.

It has been a wonderful 4 weeks. Experiences that are not captured on film and will be hard to describe.

On reflection, I can honestly say that my 17 days there have been perhaps the most enjoyable of my life. ... I think if the experience has changed me in any way it has given me a more "just do it" attitude...

I think of the Antarctic Explorers who braved the coldest, windiest place on earth for months at a time, without the relief of a warm room, or even dry clothes, at the end of the day.

... It was wonderful to have participated—most of all to push the boundaries of our comfort zone. Yes it was scary on several occasions. As a learning experience this one must be rated ten out of ten.

Overall though, I have felt pretty humble over the past few days as I realize just how lucky I am to be here and see this continent...Now that I am here, I want to see everything...

Antarctica strikes me as not much different than anywhere we live. It's up to you to get out and experience it.

... It was a fantastic trip, packed with memorable moments - the trip of a lifetime and probably a life-changing event for me.

The trip has been the fulfilment of a long and dearly held dream. ... The reality was all I had hoped for and much much more.

These types of quotes again represent the positive mood of the respondents, but they also continue to reveal a critical awareness of the issues: (1) what the media does or does not show; (2) how the RSR is one place in Antarctica and the whole vast continent cannot be seen as uniform; (3) how the national science programs interact with tourists; and (4) how science and tourism has blurry lines.

All respondents in the recollection phase (53) indicated they had or would share their experiences. This ranged from showing photos to friends and family, speaking engagements, and for some, curriculum development and conferences (94 percent had their expectations at least met, more likely far exceeded).

For the level of membership in conservation and environmental groups, 77 percent of those who had been a member were no more active now, and 86 percent of those who had not been a member were still not a member. In terms of visitation and its effects, 58 percent of visitors thought visitation both supported and harmed the environment, with only 6 percent believing it solely harmed. Of those who thought both, upon clarification 81 percent felt that the benefits still outweighed the impacts.

Are they now an ambassador for the Antarctic? Eighty percent believed they were able to be given such a label as a result of the visit, however, there was very little intention to change behavior (both generally and Antarctic related) due to the trip. In conclusion, most visitors were still quite critical and passionate of how important their experience has been or where the need for the public to discover the Antarctic hands-on, fits with science and preservation.

It has already given me a new lease on life, sparked some ideas for new dreams. The long-term benefits to me personally are incalculable.

I have many new experiences to draw on over the rest of my life for inspiration in my art. The time out from normal life has allowed me to be more continuously creative.

The whole experience was just one huge fabulous perfect reward for the rest of my life. I'll be able to cast my mind back to a thousand tiny incidents and smile and feel completely happy.

A bit tired and emotional. The whole experience. . . seems surreal.

Feel like this visit is a unique chunk out of/not part of my usual life—a little unreal/bizarre. . . Scale of the place. . .

Conclusions

In examining the conceptualization of visitor experience in the RSR, this research has not only addressed a research gap, but is also laying important groundwork for future projects. A hierarchical analysis of experience should, upon further analysis, provide indication as to whether benefits could exist as a result of a visit. In much of the literature on ecotourism and Antarctic tourism, the terms “ambassadorship” or “conservation benefit” are used to justify such tourism and are anecdotally viewed to be empirical results of a visit.

Orams (1997) states that educational psychology points toward the difficulties in changing human behavior especially

in such a short time frame as an Antarctic visit (sometimes as short as 4 days). However, Suedfeld (1987) states that even a short exposure can provide change following an “extreme experience.” The “extreme experience” is usually confined to traumatic events inserted into an everyday environment, but there is reason to believe that extreme and unusual environments can have the same effects (Suedfeld 1987). The RSR is perhaps as far removed and different from most people’s everyday life as is possible.

As the final stage of an experience, continued recollection could also be that first step towards ambassadorship (see Maher 2005b). This process of recollection, perhaps leading to ambassadorship, is best described in experiential education literature: (1) Step one is the concrete experience, whereby an individual has done something, such as completing a task; (2) Step two is when the individual reflects on what has occurred; (3) Step three is where an individual generalizes or thinks about the possibility of a number of outcomes from the experience; and finally (4) Step four is testing those outcomes (Kolb 1984.) As discussed by Sugerman and others (2000), any change resulting from experiences requires various stratified review and reflection. In an article on auto-ethnography as a research tool, Straker (2004: 57) reflects on her Antarctic journeys, “my journeys to Antarctica have been an adventure, not just because of its special nature but because of the reflections and dreams it has stimulated. It heightens emotions, widens horizons, and even sitting here writing about the place I feel a glow, a tingling in the cheeks, and inner smile.”

The concept of “ambassadorship” is the product of many Antarctic writers and tour operators (see Kershaw 1998; Thomas 1994). A benefit of tourism is “the promotion of environmental conservation deriving from the tourists’ enhanced appreciation of conservation values and regional conservation needs” (Dingwall 1995: 90). Tour operators go to the Antarctic because they love the place, they love to share it, and they know that it has to be looked after (Wikander 2002). According to Antarctica New Zealand’s (1998) preparation video, “Antarctica is the last great wilderness and the world’s most pristine environment. . . all who visit have a responsibility to help keep it this way . . . wilderness/aesthetic values” and as stated by Landau (2002: 35), this is consistent with the philosophy of Antarctic tourism pioneer Lars-Eric Lindblad, “you can’t protect what you don’t know.”

According to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), they are “creating ambassadors to the last great continent” (Denise Landau, personal communication, 4/29/2004) and these are the type of benefits discussed by Marsh (2000), who mentions IAATO’s claim to creating a “corps” of ambassadors. Interestingly, Bauer (1997: 183) contends, “tourists themselves do not see themselves as ambassadors, but that other groups, in particular tour operators, like to attach this label to them, perhaps to justify their own actions.” This quote is directly in opposition to some of Bauer’s earlier arguments (see Bauer and Diggins 1994), and the data found in this research.

In the end, perhaps it is best summed up as:

We can only hope that the Antarctic will remain a continent with no political barriers; a place where the ordinary individual still has the right to see and experience; where all people, be they tourists, sailors or administrators, in comprehending

the magnitude of the Antarctic, will continue to safeguard its wilderness (Poncet and others 1992: no page number).

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