

## **Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Presentation to IAATO members May 2012, Providence RI**

### **GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE 2011/12 SEASON**

Following an annual decline in the number of visiting cruise ships since 2008, the number of visits to South Georgia increased last season. When compared with the previous season, this reflects in part the fact that there were no cancellations during the course of last season. Nevertheless this is an encouraging trend. In total 51 vessels visited carrying 5860 passengers. There was, however, a significant reduction in visits by yachts, down to 7 visits when compared to 18 visits last year.

Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) wishes to thank again all vessel operators, who have assisted with the carriage of Government staff and contractors last season. Without this valuable assistance it would be increasingly difficult to undertake many important projects.

In other areas it has been a constructive year and progress continues to be made on a number of fronts. Since the last year's meeting, the Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance has now been enacted and this in turn has enabled GSGSSI to establish a 1 million km<sup>2</sup> Marine Protected Area in the South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Maritime Zone. In the coming year work will commence on the designation of terrestrial Specially Protected Areas (SPAs). This will not have a bearing on the current visitor management structure and approved landing sites, but it will provide enhanced legal protection for special areas of South Georgia; areas to which access is currently not permitted.

GSGSSI maintenance staff continue to work hard on the up keep of the museum buildings in Grytviken. This includes repainting the church (in advance of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year) and making safe structures to ensure continued safe access for visitors next season. A thorough review of the long-term management plan for Grytviken is now in progress. Other additional works have included the commissioning of an electric boiler at KEP, thereby making the entire base infrastructure entirely reliant on renewable energy from hydroelectric power. The repair and refurbishment of the King Edward Point (KEP) former gaol (now a major incident store) has also been completed. Following the enactment of the Prohibited Areas Ordinance, new signage is now also in place around all the prohibited areas at the former whaling stations.

### **INCIDENTS AND COMPLIANCE ISSUES**

#### **Shackleton Walk Fatality**

Early in the New Year it was with great sadness that GSGSSI learned that a passenger had died as a result of injuries sustained following a fall whilst undertaking the Shackleton overland walk from Fortuna Bay to Stromness. It is not appropriate for the Government to comment any further on this incident at this stage as the Coroner for the Territory is still conducting his investigation. The inquest is not expected to reconvene until later this year.

Notwithstanding the findings of the Coroner, GSGSSI is conducting its own review of the GSGSSI Site Visitor Management Plan for this activity. This may be revised before next season to include increased staff to passenger ratios and other more prescriptive instructions regarding management of visitors undertaking this walk.

Two other incidents of note occurred. The first involved passengers off one ship being stranded ashore for a few hours at KEP due to deteriorating conditions. The staff on base responded very well to this situation and this proved to be a useful learning experience for our team ashore. This incident has also highlighted the importance of passengers carrying 24 hours supply of any prescribed medications with them when they go ashore. (Not that this became an issue in this instance). This point will be highlighted in next season's permitting documentation.

The second vessel incident involved a mechanical failure on a vessel leading to reduced power and propulsion. This resulted in the ship having to come alongside at KEP and remain there for over a week until assistance arrived to repatriate passengers and take the vessel in tow. GSGSSI appreciates the response efforts made by the operator and wishes to thank all of the parties involved in this recovery and repatriation operation. In the aftermath of all 3 incidents the Government Officers praised the actions and professionalism of all 3 Expedition Leaders.

#### COMPLIANCE ISSUES

This is the first season that GSGSSI has been in a position task the Government's fishery patrol vessel to assist with random monitoring of passenger landings. This tasking initiative worked well and will in the future become particularly important in light of the heightened biosecurity measures.

One Government Officer also spent an extended period at one remote landing site, monitoring landings and engaging EL's and staff ashore. This proved to be another successful initiative and one, which we will seek to take forward in the coming season.

The Government Officers report that there have been no significant compliance issues this season, nor have the findings of the random biosecurity checks or new vessel observer coverage presented any cause for concern. This is most commendable.

#### VISITOR FEES and ADMINISTRATION

Outstanding debts resulting from unpaid vessel visit invoices over the last 8 years now amount to a significant loss of revenue for GSGSSI. These debts are complicated further by the fact that, even in instances of insolvency, debts cannot be easily written off by GSGSSI's Financial Secretary.

GSGSSI is therefore having to review the visitor fee payment arrangements in

order to reduce the Government's risk of exposure to significant bad debts. In effect this means that GSGSSI will have to start invoicing cruise vessel applicants for 50% of the projected visitors fees in advance of a vessel's visit. This will apply to all commercial vessels carrying 12 or more paying passengers.

In practice, GSGSSI will issue an invoice at the application stage on the basis of the information provided in the application (taking into account the projected passenger numbers and duration of the visit.). This invoice will need to be paid prior to the vessel visiting South Georgia. The invoice will be issued directly by GSGSSI.

In real terms there should be no significant financial impact for vessel operators as a result of this arrangement. Transactions will only need to be brought forward by a few weeks, as the final invoice for each vessel visit (those invoices issued to the vessel at KEP by the GO's) should be paid within 30 days.

The KEP Government Officers will be advised about each invoice raised prior to every vessel visit and will simply subtract this amount from the final invoice then issued at KEP. (This final invoice then covers harbour fees, customs fees and remaining visitor fees.)

All IAATO members are reminded that from July 2012 the visitor fee structure (for all passengers aged 16 years and over) will be as follows:

Visits of up to 72 hours: £110

Visits more than 72 hours: £165 (covering a maximum duration of up to one calendar month.)

These rates are due to be reviewed again in 2 years time (in July 2014.)

Operators of vessels intending to visit South Georgia are reminded to utilise the GSGSSI website ([www.sgisland.gs](http://www.sgisland.gs)) in order to access up to date documentation. The revised 2012 information for visitors booklet will be posted on the site in the coming weeks. Expedition staff must also ensure that they are using the 2010 version of the briefing DVD and this can be obtained either directly from GSGSSI or through their shipping agents in Stanley. If there is interest in making this available for download from our website then this will be investigated further.

## HABITAT RESTORATION & BIOSECURITY

In 2011 the first phase of baiting operations for the South Georgia Heritage Trust's (SGHT) Habitat Restoration project to eradicate rats from South Georgia was completed. This was a tremendous achievement in which aerial baiting targeted the Thatcher, Green and Mercer peninsulas. Since then GSGSSI has been undertaking important monitoring surveys in these areas to look for any evidence of rats. To date the survey results have been most encouraging and no

rats have been found. Several years of monitoring will be necessary before we can be certain of full success. In advance of Phase 2 in 2013, GSGSSI has also been undertaking further surveys in remote areas, which will be targeted for rat eradication in the coming year. These surveys have been funded by the UK's Overseas Territories Environmental Programme (OTEP) and the work has focused on genetic sampling of rats, to ensure that the integrity of the distinct rat populations being targeted as well as enabling the Government to ascertain whether any possible rat found in the future has been introduced or is a survivor of the original population (information which could be critical to a response strategy). The teams also surveyed populations of birds deemed to be at risk of incidental mortality to enhance existing baseline knowledge.

In conjunction with these efforts GSGSSI continues to review biosecurity procedures for the Territory to further reduce the risk of a rodent (or any other invasive species) being reintroduced or transferred between sites. The recently enacted Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance has underpinned this effort and GSGSSI's Attorney General's Chambers are currently drafting legislation, which will make all aspects of the biosecurity procedures legally binding. GSGSSI is also pleased to announce that GSGSSI's new Environmental Officer, Dr Jennifer Lee, has very recently come into post. Biosecurity in sub-Antarctic islands is an area of expertise for Jen and she will be reviewing these measures in the coming months.

GSGSSI appreciated the comments submitted by IAATO members last year when the Government reviewed biosecurity management practices following the completion of the first phase of the rat eradication project.

During this review consideration was given to management regimes, and access arrangements for visitor landing sites, which have recently been designated as being rat free (having formerly been rat infested.) The final outcome is that there will be no visit permit conditions regarding the order or sequence of landings and, that regardless of the status of the site, the same rigorous application biosecurity of checks and measures must be undertaken for every landing.

In summary, one rigorous biosecurity policy must be applied to all landings, regardless of the status of the site.

Access to existing landing sites will continue (except during periods of Habitat Restoration work.)

Existing closed areas will remain closed, thereby maintaining the current pattern of visitor landings at approved sites around the island, (thus mitigating any potential impact caused by visitors to a finite number of sites.) (Until further advised, this will include the Cooper Bay chinstraps.)

Special permission will still be required for any landings by scientific field parties (or any other specialist expeditions or groups) at any of the existing

closed areas. In the future a number of the existing closed areas are likely to be designated as SPA's with associated management plans.

Vessels other than those undertaking Government duties (for which stringent biosecurity plans are in place) are now not normally permitted to use the jetty at KEP. The only exceptions will be special cases, including force majeure; in which case there must be rigorous oversight of biosecurity precautions by the Government Officers.

A biosecurity plan for the jetty at KEP is now in place, as are contingency response plans for the KEP staff to implement rapidly in the event of a suspected reintroduction of a rodent into one of the neighbouring rat free areas. It is hoped that this will be followed up by an exercise later this year.

From next season all biosecurity information will be disseminated in a separate document (rather than being contained within the general information booklet.)

Government Officers are undertaking increasing numbers of biosecurity spot checks of visitors and they are receiving guidance from veterinary officers and port authorities to enable them to conduct checks for rats on vessels.

All visiting fishing vessels and reefers are now required to carry tamperproof bait stations, as are our own Government Vessels. (This policy may be extended to include cruise ships as well.) Note that cruise vessels operating with enclosed tenders (landing at Grytviken) should already be using bait stations.

Increased surveillance by the GSGSSI patrol ship (and other Government vessels) is being undertaken to monitor for unexpected vessel arrivals (particularly yachts), which may not be fully aware of their biosecurity obligations (and legal requirement to implement these.) To this end GSGSSI now works closely with the Falkland Islands customs to share information about yacht movements.

The movement of yachts between rat infested and rat free areas remains a concern, particularly following the recent incidence of a rat boarding a yacht at anchor of Prince Olav by swimming out from the shore and then climbing the anchor cable. Whilst yachts should always be using rat guards on shore lines, GSGSSI is concerned that these are often not effective. An effective solution needs to be found and IAATO yacht operators have and are being encouraged to engage with GSGSSI and consider how best to achieve this.

**HABITAT RESTORATION – Projects next season and arrangements for visitors.**

#### **Bittercress**

Throughout the season GSGSSI staff have continued to tackle invasive plants in the vicinity of KEP and Grytviken. They have again been assisted in this task by a New Zealand consultant from Wildlife Management International. Efforts remain focused principally on bittercress. Progress is being made to contain this plant, but the effort to do so is proving to be extremely challenging. As with previous seasons, a number of areas around King Edward Cove will be closed to

visitors to help prevent the spread of this particularly persistent invasive plant species.

#### Reindeer

In January 2013 work will commence to herd and humanely cull the reindeer in the area of the Busen Peninsula. The urgent need to undertake this Habitat Restoration work has been outlined previously. Cruise vessel Expedition Leaders (EL's) and staff are reminded again that there are 2 documents on the GSGSSI website which outline both the reasons why this project is necessary and the findings of the working group which considered the project methodology:

1. Reindeer on South Georgia, Literature Review and Discussion of Management Options.
2. Report on the outputs of the Advisory Group on Reindeer Management methodology.

Throughout this planning process GSGSSI's principle concerns have centered animal welfare issues and the need for the project undertaken as humanely and professionally as possible despite the challenges of working in such a remote location.

This project will commence early in January 2013. The project will be undertaken by Sami reindeer herders under the supervision of staff from the SNO (Norwegian Nature Inspectorate), who will be employed by GSGSSI. The Norwegian team are experienced in managing reindeer herds and two of the SNO staff very recently undertook an extensive reconnaissance of the South Georgia herds earlier this year. Their intention is to gradually herd and then corral the animals onto an area where they will be humanely culled before the carcasses are butchered, hung and then frozen offshore on a supporting vessel. It is anticipated that there will need to be some ground shooting as it will not be possible to herd the reindeer from every part of the peninsula.

In practice this means that there may be disruption to landing sites in this area between the first week in January and the third week in February. The ground shooting on the Busen will also be followed by further ground shooting in the Royal Bay area.

It has always been GSGSSI's intention to minimize waste and if at all possible to utilise the meat from this operation. This remains the case and this will be covered in a subsequent section.

#### Norwegian Rats

Following the successful completion of baiting Phase One of South Georgia Heritage Trust's Habitat Restoration Project to eradicate Norwegian rats and mice in 2011, Phase two of this ambitious project is set commence March (or possibly late February) and will continue into May (and beyond) if necessary. Aerial baiting operations are expected to commence either in the vicinity of the Nunez Peninsula to proceed in a clockwise direction working through the baiting

zones until Cumberland Bay is reached, or conversely from Cumberland West Bay in the opposite direction.

Throughout the operation the helicopters will be operating from Forward Operating Bases (FOB's) along the coast, whilst also returning periodically to Grytviken. Phase Two will be a significantly more complex operation involving a much larger team and 3 helicopters. (A separate briefing will be given by the SGHT).

The arrangements for passenger landings at Grytviken will be the same as in 2011. Access to the cemetery, church and museum will be maintained, however the SGHT helicopter engineers will need to utilise some areas of the former whaling station and these areas will be closed to visitors during helicopter operations.

#### HABITAT RESTORATION - MANAGEMENT OF LANDINGS

All IAATO Operators will receive a briefing document from GSGSSI detailing the arrangements for passenger landings during the course of the various habitat restoration projects. This will be distributed as soon as the SGHT operational plan has been confirmed. GSGSSI regrets that some disruption to ship's schedules will be inevitable for a few visiting vessels, but the Government hopes and trusts that visitors will recognize the importance of these projects in the context of the highly significant contribution they are making to the future ecology of the island and through so doing visitors will be contributing in their own way to the success of these projects.

Both the reindeer and rat projects will result in the closure of some landing sites for short periods. However, these closures will be relatively localised and transient. There are 43 approved visitor landing sites and the Government hopes that even during particularly busy periods for both habitat restoration work and ship visits, it will still be possible to permit a broad range of landing options at a variety of sites.

**To avoid unnecessary disruption to either vessel schedules or the habitat restoration work ashore, and whilst also avoiding conflict between vessels for site access, it is very important that vessel operators and Expedition Staff study the briefing instructions very closely.**

To assist with planning the briefing document will outline the following information:

i) The general areas of coast that are likely to be subject to habitat restoration projects during the course of the whole season and a best estimate of likely timelines.

This will enable vessel operators to either:

- Avoid an area of coast completely and book landing sites elsewhere, confident in the knowledge that the site booking will be secure (subject to weather.)
- Book landing sites in areas, which MIGHT be affected, in the knowledge that

they may need to make alternative plans at short notice.

ii) The requirement for EL's on visiting vessels to be briefed (on a daily basis) about any areas and landing sites which are going to be closed on any given day. Habitat restoration project coordinators will advise Government Officers on a daily basis about areas of coast which will be need to be closed to visitors the following day. This will vary from day to day and will be wholly dependent on the ongoing daily progress of each project.

Any yachts which do not have adequate communications equipment to enable them receive daily updates will need to plan their visits on the basis of projected plans and remain ready to adjust these at short notice.

To avoid any confusion, the EL's point of contact on South Georgia must always be the duty Government Officer at KEP.

#### IAATO *CRUISE ONLY* (CR) CATEGORY VESSEL VISITS

Last year GSGSSI announced that consideration was being given again to permitting access (and landings at Grytviken) for vessels larger than IAATO Category Two.

The original introduction of this restriction stemmed from concerns raised in reports prepared in 2007, which highlighted various issues including the limited incidence response capability on South Georgia and uncertainty as to how the cruise ship industry would respond to the ban on the use and carriage of HFO in the Antarctic Treaty Area.

Over subsequent years GSGSSI has been working to significantly improve the incident response capability ashore at KEP. Whilst these measures are by no means comprehensive, they do provide the KEP base staff with the materials necessary to meet the most basic needs and sanitation requirements of the passengers and crew from a large category two vessel, should they find themselves stranded ashore at the base following an incident at sea.

Earlier this year the GSGSSI approached operators of IAATO cruise only (CR) vessel operators to seek expressions of interest for allowing vessels carrying in the region of 800 passengers to visit Grytviken again. (A vessel carrying up to 800 passengers is deemed to be the upper limit, which could possibly be managed.) GSGSSI wishes to thank IAATO members for their responses.

GSGSSI has reviewed this situation carefully and subject to some further improvements to the Major Incident response capability and further engagement with stakeholders in September, permission may be given in future to a limited number of landings at Grytviken by vessels carrying up to 850 passengers. An announcement will be made following the stakeholders meeting.



In the coming months GSGSSI intends to further enhance our response capability, and a major incident response training exercise is planned for the coming season.

#### WORKS NEXT SEASON.

Further to the habitat restoration projects, which will cause some degree of disruption to landings and movement on the ground at Grytviken, a number of other maintenance works projects will be underway next season. These will only cause very minor disruption to visits. As well as ongoing maintenance works at Grytviken and the Museum, the GSGSSI works programme will include the removal of asbestos from the former managers villa at Husvik and the refurbishment of Discovery House (at KEP) to return the building to its original role as a location for visiting scientists to stay.

#### REINDEER MEAT

As previously mentioned, GSGSSI is determined to make every effort to minimize waste and utilise meat recovered from the reindeer habitat restoration project. A very considerable effort is going to be made to achieve this. Any financial gain will then be used to help fund the substantial costs of habitat restoration projects and monitoring work in coming seasons.

Distribution of the meat will present its own challenges, regardless of the fact that a veterinary officer will oversee the whole operation and the processing of the meat will be to European Union standards. Nevertheless, GSGSSI recognises that the most pragmatic way to distribute the meat will (for the most part) probably be to do so through the Falkland Islands, where agricultural and veterinary officers are already fully conversant with the operation and meat import considerations. To this end GSGSSI will be seeking to sell as much of this meat product as possible through the Falkland Islands. There has already been one strong expression of interest from one IAATO member and GSGSSI would urge all vessel operators (including those which only visit Stanley) to seize this opportunity to offer your passengers a truly unique dish and in so doing make a valued contribution to the habitat restoration work on South Georgia.

Only the prime cuts of fillets and hind quarters will be marketed. GSGSSI would encourage any interested companies to contact them at the earliest opportunity. There will only be a finite amount of meat available and this will have to be handled on a first come first served basis.

Finally

Any IAATO members, who have not already done so, really should download the new South Georgia iPhone/iPad knowledge app, which went live in January of this year.

<http://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/the-island-of-south-georgia/id492532701?mt=8>

Also, seven years after the publication of the *A Visitors Guide to South Georgia*, members should be aware that the revised version will be available in all reputable South Atlantic retail outlets in time for next season.

GSGSSI will also be replacing the Visitors Pack with a newly revised booklet, which all paying visitors will receive next season when the last of the packs have been distributed.

If any members have any questions then please do not hesitate to contact GSGSSI.

Richard McKee  
May 2012

[exo@gov.gs](mailto:exo@gov.gs)  
[www.sgisland.gs](http://www.sgisland.gs)