



# 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 Members IAATO 2015**

### **1. 2014-15 Season overview**

A record number of cruise ship visits and passenger landings took place during the 2014-15 season. 22 different ships made a total of 65 visits and a total of 8,142 passengers (cruise ships and yachts) landed, an increase of 1,118 passengers over the previous season. The 2007-08 season was the last time that visitors numbers exceeded 8,000 (8,066).

Yacht visits were similar to last season with 17 visits made by 12 different yachts (carrying 217 people).

There were also 6 expeditions to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (4 mountaineering, 1 kayaking and 1 filming).

### **2. Administration**

#### **2.1 Visitor Fees**

Visitor fees will be reviewed again next year and are likely to increase in line with inflation in July 2016. (Biannual reviews enable incremental increases and avoid significant one-off increases). Applicants should be aware that a new GSGSSI tourism database system will be in operation this season and permits will not be issued now until payment has been received for advance visitor fee invoices

#### **2.2 Documentation**

The following documents are currently being reviewed in advance of the coming season:

Information for Visitors to South Georgia 2015/16  
SGSSI visit application 2015  
Biosecurity Protocols 2015

All visit applicants must ensure that they refer to the GSGSSI website for the correct (current) documents and submit their application(s) using the 2015 visitor application form. (This may be submitted either by email or online on the GSGSSI website.)

Visit permit holders will again this season be issued with USB sticks holding all the important documents they require, including briefing documents and the briefing film as well as site visitor management plans.

### **2.3 IAATO field staff online assessment & EL experience**

From next season it will be a condition of the visit permit that all IAATO staff landing on GSGSSI must have passed the IAATO field staff online assessment.

Government Officers may follow this up at King Edward Point.

The time limit for returning ELs to retain their status as 'briefed permit holders' will now also be reduced to 3 years.

### **2.4 SVMP (extended walks)**

Staff should be aware that new maps for the existing SVMPs for extended walks are currently being prepared and will be ready for next season.

### **2.5 SSI visit applications**

GSGSSI is preparing a new template for South Sandwich Islands (SSI) visit applications, as an annex to the main visit application form. SSI visits are generally not encouraged and must be approached with a high degree of caution and highly robust contingency plans, given the remote, harsh and inaccessible nature of the islands. Until now such applications have been managed on a case-by-case basis. This initiative will streamline this process.

A number of SVMPs will also be drafted for a limited number of SSI locations.

### **2.6 Medical Review**

The review of visiting ships medical capabilities, requested by HM Coroner in Stanley following the inquest into the fatal accident involving a passenger in 2012, is nearing completion and the interim report will soon be available.

The Government recognises that many cruise ship operators have already undertaken critical reviews of their medical capabilities for operating in remote and challenging locations (recognising the need for enhanced medical capabilities above and beyond their vessel flag state requirements). GSGSSI remains committed to working closely with IAATO and engaging IAATO members before any policy decisions are finally implemented as conditions of the visit permit. The intention is to have recommendations in place for the start of the coming season.

### **2.7 Expeditions Review**

GSGSSI staff will shortly be working with the Chairman of the Expeditions Advisory Panel to review the expedition application and review process.

## **2.8 Strategy & Legislative Review**

GSGSSI is undertaking a broad ranging strategy review for 2016-2020, which will include the tourism strategy. The draft strategy document will be circulated separately to members for comment.

Drafting of the new immigration legislation (including legal arrangements for visitor permitting) is expected to commence shortly. When complete this too will be circulated to stakeholders (including IAATO) for comment.

## **3. Key Incidents**

### **3.1 *Plancius* stranding**

23 Jan: 72 people off the *Plancius* (66 pax, 5 staff and 1 crew), were stranded at Grytviken overnight due to strong winds. A serious incident was declared and GSGSSI & SGHT staff were mobilised to coordinate the response. The safety of the passengers was the primary concern and arrangements were made to feed and provide bedding. The interaction between the expedition staff and staff on base was good. Valuable lessons were learned by GSGSSI, including the requirement for provision of additional items of incident response equipment and stores, modifications to lighting at Grytviken and a re-distribution of some of the existing major incident stores.

### **3.2 Yacht incident**

On 27 Dec GSGSSI received a report from an IAATO vessel that passengers and staff had witnessed passengers from an IAATO yacht disturbing king penguins on the beach at Gold Harbour the previous day.

Statements from were submitted to GSGSSI and the yacht skipper was interviewed under caution. Having reviewed and considered all of the statements, a formal letter of warning was then issued to the skipper by the Commissioner, who deemed that there was sufficient evidence as to give cause for concern that the crew and passengers off from the yacht *may* have behaved in such a way as to have caused disturbance to the breeding colony. The letter made clear the ramifications if any future reports of similar such conduct.

The matter has been referred to the IAATO compliance committee and GSGSSI is now awaiting the outcome of the committee's findings.

### **3.3 Shackleton Walk accidents & injuries**

All expedition staff supervising the Shackleton Walk must give urgent attention to a recent series of accidents occurring in the latter stages of the walk.

All 3 accidents have involved slips on the lower slopes of the descent into the valley or in the valley itself. Staff must ensure that all walkers are aware of the need to exercise extreme care and attention on the descent, particularly on wet grass, when their legs are tired at the end of the walk and the beach is in sight. All accompanying staff must remain extremely vigilant at all

times, and particularly on this issue during the latter stage of the walk when their clients are tired and possibly less focussed.

Incidents:

20 Nov (WPT 11- 12) slip, broken tibia.

29 Dec (WPT11 - 12) slip (wet grass, waterfall), fractured arm.

26 Feb, slip and fall on walk back from waterfall, 4 stiches required.

## **4. Activities and legal responsibility**

### **4.1 IAATO guidelines for kayaking and diving**

GSGSSI welcomes the development of the new guidelines for kayaking and diving. The Government Officers at KEP will engage with visiting ELs to review and scrutinise the details of the operational procedures and safety plans on visiting ships.

### **4.2 UAVs**

The GSGSSI position on UAVs is currently under review. All UAV flights must, however, have written permission from the GSGSSI and each application will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

If permission is granted by GSGSSI for any UAV flights visits, then the IAATO operators must ensure that the IAATO guidelines are also followed (as well as any GSGSSI permit conditions) unless permission has been granted by GSGSSI for any deviation from these.

### **4.3 Staff responsibility**

Whilst it is a condition of the visit permit conditions that all visitors must be properly briefed and supervised an EL cannot be held legally responsible for the actions of one of the passengers under their charge and the person who commits an offence (for example under the WPA Ordinance) is the person who is liable to be prosecuted for the offence.

## **5. Habitat Restoration, Biosecurity & Site Access**

### **5.1 Rat Eradication**

GSGSSI is very pleased to report that the SGHT has recently completed the third and final phase of their project to bait all rat and mice infested areas on South Georgia. This is an incredible achievement.

Attention is now focussed on monitoring the baited areas for the possible presence of any surviving rats, though to date, all of the surveys undertaken have failed to detect the presence of any rats, which is most encouraging.

## **5.2 Reindeer**

On behalf of GSGSSI Norwegian Nature Inspectorate marksmen have now completed the final GSGSSI cull of the remaining reindeer on the Barff Peninsula.

## **5.3 Invasive plants**

GSGSSI continues to make progress with the long-term and challenging project to control and possibly eradicate invasive plants, particularly in the vicinity of Grytviken and other whaling stations in Stromness Bay.

## **5.4 Biosecurity**

The tremendous progress with the habitat restoration work only serves to reinforce the importance of rigorously implementing biosecurity checks and precautions **for every landing**.

There is always a risk of complacency creeping in the aftermath of such a focussed and intensive period of work. This must not be allowed to happen and familiarity must never breed contempt. It is the responsibility of every individual landing on South Georgia to make biosecurity their top priority for every landing.

It was most alarming this season for GSGSSI Government Officers to identify a number of lapses in boot washing procedures and personal biosecurity checks. What was particularly concerning was the lack of awareness that checks need to be undertaken for every landing (not just the first landing on South Georgia).

This, coupled with a rat incursion at KEP (unlikely to be from an IAATO vessel), only reinforces the importance of the responsibility, which must be borne by all staff to ensure that biosecurity measures are rigorously implemented at every stage of their visit

## **5.5 Site Access**

There are not expected to be any site access restrictions next season resulting from habitat restoration or any other projects. Current access restrictions in Cooper Bay (limiting access to the macaronis only) will continue, following the previous outbreaks of avian cholera in the chinstrap penguin colony.

The draft tourism strategy for 2016-20 (covered separately) outlines the importance of managing visitor site access in the coming years with the expected return of many thousands of breeding burrowing petrels to sites previously infested by rodents.

It is essential that vessel staff remain vigilant for signs of returning birds and that they manage their passengers carefully to ensure that there is no wildlife disturbance, whilst also reporting any changes in ecological diversity to GSGSSI.

## **6. Works and projects**

### **6.1 Proposed works for next season**

A range of maintenance work is under consideration for KEP and Grytviken. The Grytviken maintenance plan (including work on the museum) may include:

- Slop chest: completion of internal fittings.
- Bone loft and Meat loft: structural repairs.
- Additional barriers to prevent access to any potentially dangerous areas.
- Engineers workshop: re-cladding and wall repairs.
- Mainstore: re-cladding, wall repairs, new doors and internal works.
- Nybrakka: new basement windows and possible internal works.
- Cemetery: reset Shackleton's grave.
- Tijuca jetty: possible repairs to handrails and fitting of mooring points.

Other Areas:

- Prion Island: boardwalk maintenance and fitting of plastic mesh

### **6.2 Grytviken Multimedia Project**

Between 2012 and 2014 a series of Lasar scan surveys of the principle former whaling stations were commissioned by GSGSSI with funding coming from the Norwegian and UK Governments. The data captured by the survey has created a highly detailed historical record of the sites. In order to facilitate public access to this incredible imagery, GSGSSI and the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage have commissioned Shadow Industries to develop multimedia facilities for the Grytviken museum as well as the Sandefjord Whaling Museum and Oslo museums in Norway.

The Grytviken facility will be housed in the recently restored slop chest and will be composed of:

- One interactive kiosk, which will enable the user(s) to navigate through the former whaling stations and view selected film footage, still images and interviews with former whalers at key sites within each station.
- One large screen for the viewing of a short film presentation (not interactive), which will allow groups of visitors to experience a "fly-through" of the former stations, with key elements of the film footage and commentary.

**Final point**

In recent years the SGHT and GSGSSI have both achieved remarkable accomplishments with their respective habitat restoration projects. It is essential that all visitors re-double their efforts to ensure that all biosecurity precautions are being rigorously and effectively implemented throughout the full duration of every visit. No individual, or company, should have to be held responsible for an ecologically catastrophic biosecurity breach.

GSGSSI appreciates greatly all the efforts IAATO members to thoroughly address this challenge.

Richard McKee  
Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands  
April 2015