

Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Update for IAATO Members June 2010

Last season South Georgia visitor numbers declined slightly from the previous summer. This was, however, to be expected given that a number of vessels indicated that they would not be returning at the end of the previous season. There were also 4 visit cancellations for various operational reasons. In total there were 64 cruise ships visits carrying approximately 7200 passengers, as well as 20 yacht visits carrying approximately 80 visitors to the Island (not including professional crew).

The Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) wishes to thank again all those operators who assisted again last season with passages for staff to and from South Georgia. Whilst GSGSSI always aims to utilise berths on Government vessels, the numbers of personnel movements involved in recent projects has meant that this has not always possible and sincere thanks go to IAATO members for all their assistance.

GSGSSI also appreciated greatly the swift communication of reports to Government early in the season concerning king penguins suffering from lesions. Reports of this nature are always acted on very quickly.

In the wider context of the Territory as a whole, it has been another busy year with some highlights being the full operation of the Hydro-electric facility which has now been running smoothly since October 2009, the recertification of the Patagonian toothfish fishery by the Marine Stewardship Council in September and the commissioning of the biosecurity facility at KEP, which is now fully operational and has proved to be a successful model for other UK Overseas Territories.

ADMINISTRATION

In March 2010 IAATO members were advised of GSGSSI's intention to increase visitor fees for the coming season. The last increase in fees was 4 years ago and a planned increase last season was deferred for one year following the global financial downturn. It is the Government's intention to now maintain a steady incremental fee increase in the coming years. The main visitor fee will increase by £5 pounds, to £105 from the start of the 2010 season and a by further £5 GBP in 2 years from the start of the 2012 season to £110 (a 10% increase over 6 years). Harbour fees are also increasing next season by 5% (last increase was 7 years ago).

The most significant change to the visitor fee structure will come into force in July 2011 when there will be a 50% additional charge to the visitor fee for visits extending longer than 72 hours. This policy is intended to address the disparity in visitor fees, which exists between visitors who only visit for one or two days and those who stay much longer but pay the same rate.

Similarly from July 2010 visitor fees for paying passengers and private visitors on yachts (or indeed any other vessel) will only cover one month. This policy may, however, be deferred until July 2011. IAATO Members will be notified in the coming weeks. Details of all visitor fees may be found in the 2010 Information for Visitors to South Georgia Booklet.

From next season GSGSSI will also impose a penalty fee of £100 for any applications for vessels carrying more than 12 passengers, which are submitted less than 60 days before the intended date of a visit.

Operators should take note that professional (commercial) film producers and photographers require a letter of permit and will in future be charged a daily rate for filming. Operators are asked to draw this to the attention of their clients, who should contact GSGSSI directly for further information.

At the time of writing 12 invoices for visits from last season remain unpaid. Members are reminded that invoices should be paid within the time specified on the invoice. The ongoing issue of outstanding payments means that a policy on financial penalties for late payment of invoices now has to be considered.

Vessel operators attention is drawn again to the fact that in order to ensure that you are using current versions of application forms and information documents please always refer to the GSGSSI website www.sgisland.gs (or contact GSGSSI). This website holds the most up to date versions of the Information for Visitors to South Georgia booklet and the visit application forms. Any applications received on old versions of documents are likely to be returned for resubmission. GSGSSI annually needs to revise documentation in order to reflect changes to developing management priorities and information required by the Government Officers at King Edward Point.

GSGSSI is in the process of producing a revised up to date version of the briefing DVD. This will be distributed through shipping agents in Stanley at the start of the season. If any operators wish to receive a copy in advance, they should contact GSGSSI. Whilst not a replacement for verbal briefings, the DVD is an important element of the South Georgia briefing package and Expedition Leaders (EL's) are reminded that passengers need to watch this prior to their arrival.

It is important that Expedition Leaders follow the site visitor management plans and this is a condition of permit. These are designed to minimise wildlife disturbance and confine any habitat damage to prescribed areas and tracks. One passenger was injured last season whilst undertaking the Shackleton Walk from Fortuna to Stromness, following a different route to the one specified in the site management plan.

Next season operators and permit holders will also receive a new site visitor management plan for Grytviken. GSGSSI hopes that this will be particularly useful for new Expedition Staff and it is our intention in the future to include information on the Maiviken to Grytviken walk in order to restrict the impact of walkers to a clearly defined route.

Vessel operators and EL's are also reminded that Post Visit Reports (PVR's) must be returned to GO's within 30 days of a visit.

WORKS PROJECTS

No major capital works are planned for next season, though the Drukken Villa at Grytviken (beside the museum) is being refurbished for museum staff accommodation. Work will also be undertaken on the old gaol at King Edward Point (KEP) to refurbish the interior of this historic building for use as a repository for major incident stores. The first phase of the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) rat eradication project is also due to commence in the New Year. Therefore there will also need to be some work done to prepare helicopter landing sites and hanger arrangements at Grytviken. There will also need to be access restrictions to the Grytviken whaling station during the course of the course of rat eradication helicopter operations. (This will be covered further in the document).

VISITOR MONITORING

The Government now has 2 Government Officers on duty at King Edward Point (KEP). This has helped to improve staff cover and alleviate work pressures during particularly busy periods, such as when fishing vessel licensing inspections coincide with cruise ship visits. It has also enabled officers to have more time for briefings and oversight of visits and passenger landings, including inspections to ensure that biosecurity measures are being implemented thoroughly.

Whilst it was not possible to mount another dedicated visitor monitoring project last season, the Government Officers have continued to undertake Government observer duties on new cruise ships and it remains GSGSSI's intention to undertake random monitoring of visitor landings next season, utilising the Government patrol vessel to transport Government Officers to landing sites. This type of monitoring exercise will always be undertaken with the full knowledge of the Expedition Leader (EL) who will be contacted *in situ* and advised of the intentions of the Government Staff. However, prior notification of the actual location and time of any monitoring will not be given in advance (and the timing of this will be subject to the operational commitments of the patrol vessel). GSGSSI also continues to follow with interest IAATO's progress with staff training, observer programmes and accreditation.

LEGISLATIVE REVIEW

Progress continues to be made with the legislative review process. In May 2010 the draft Wildlife and Protected Areas Bill was circulated to IAATO members and South Georgia stakeholders for comment. This particular Bill is intended to replace outdated wildlife protection legislation whilst reflecting current policy. This Ordinance is intended to provide protection for all of the Territory's native

wildlife, the provision to declare Specially Protected Areas and Marine Protected Areas and, where appropriate, for species to be listed as Specially Protected.

Some comments received by GSGSSI indicated that this time frame should have been longer. These have been noted, however, this is a pressing piece of legislation, which is required urgently to adequately protect the Territory's flora and fauna. It is a relatively short Bill, drafted to reflect existing policies and principles. Unfortunately time constraints facing the Government have meant that it was not possible to extend this consultation period. Under these circumstances, it was deemed necessary to proceed with the consultation process at the earliest opportunity, and in the time available, in order to avoid an unacceptably long delay in the enactment of the Ordinance. If GSGSSI had any concerns that this particular consultation period was not long enough then this period would have been extended. GSGSSI thanks IAATO members for their understanding on this issue and their comments on the Bill. Other upcoming Bills, such as those dealing with Visitors and the Administration of Justice are likely to require more lengthy consultation periods.

Last season GSGSSI received reports of minor birds strikes from 8 vessels. Expedition Staff are again asked to remain vigilant for bird strikes, whilst implementing mitigation measures thoroughly and responding swiftly in the event of a bird strike.

Members should note that under the new Ordinance it will be an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, capture, handle or molest a wild bird or a protected wild mammal. If it therefore transpires in future seasons that a bird strike has occurred as a result of negligence and inadequate measures being in place to prevent such an incident from happening, or a failure to respond appropriately to an incident, then GSGSSI may be bound to refer the incident to our Attorney General for possible prosecution.

YACHTS

Last season there were a series of incidents involving visiting yachts. Amongst privately owned vessels this included some crew members abandoning one yacht at Grytviken and two other yachts, which approached within 200m of asbestos exclusion limits at former whaling stations. The sinking of a private yacht en route to Cape Town (the second such incident in recent years) also highlighted the need to ensure that visitors are well informed and fully prepared for the rigors of the South Atlantic. GSGSSI is working to address this issue and raise awareness

There was also one instance of an IAATO yacht landing at a Specially Protected Area without permission. Consequently the dispensation for that vessel not to have to land first at King Edward Point on arrival for briefing was withdrawn for the remaining duration of the season.

This is the first season that the new landing arrangements have been in place at Stromness, in order to ease access issues, due to fur seals, at the northern limit of

the asbestos exclusion zone. It was disappointing to receive a further report of passengers entering the closed area. Due to this incident and the continued disregard for the exclusion limit by some yachts, GSGSSI is having to have a specific Prohibited Areas Bill drafted to address this issue. Members will be notified when this comes into force.

ASBESTOS SURVEY

A further survey of the former whaling stations is planned for late October. GSGSSI is again planning to contract an asbestos consultant from Thames Laboratories in the UK to undertake this work. The intention is to assess the current state of the asbestos in the stations and ascertain whether any adjustments to the current management regime are required. The GSGSSI patrol vessel will support the survey and an Antarctic heritage surveyor is also being contracted to undertake an assessment of the current state of the buildings. Whilst GSGSSI cannot afford to undertake any remediation work at the former stations, we still hope to be able facilitate opportunities for heritage organisations to identify structures and artifacts, which should be prioritised for future restoration and preservation work.

RAT ERADICATION

GSGSSI is pleased to report that permission has been given to the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) to proceed with the first phase of the South Georgia rat eradication project in 2011, subject to a number of conditions being addressed. GSGSSI is very supportive of this project, recognising the importance of such a major habitat restoration project and the significance of this ecological recovery for island-wide populations of birds. (The SGHT will also be addressing IAATO separately to expand on their operational plan for the coming season).

GSGSSI will assist this project as much as possible by providing logistical support. The Government is, however, also responsible for authorising the project and GSGSSI has been working closely with the Trust to deal with a number of issues and planning concerns. Good progress is being made in addressing these issues before the eradication work commences. GSGSSI would like to thank IAATO members for their comments on the SGHT operational plan, which were helpful.

The first phase of the project in February and March 2011 will focus on the Greene, Thatcher and Mercer peninsulas. The overall impact to visitors during this phase will be low, though visitors to Grytviken will be affected by helicopter operations to load bait for aerial dispersal over the adjacent areas.

In April 2010 GSGSSI staff visited Grytviken along with SGHT operational planners, including the senior pilot. An assessment was made of potential landing sites and hanger facilities. An operational plan was prepared for flight operations from Grytviken, which covers the principle and alternative landing sites. The safety of visitors and local staff is of paramount importance throughout this operation. There will be no over flights over any cruise ship or

Zodiac and during periods of operational flying, areas of the Grytviken whaling station will unfortunately have to be closed to visitors. It will, though, still be possible for visitors to watch the bait loading operation from a safe distance. Needless to say the flights will cause a transitory disruption to the Grytviken visitor experience. GSGSSI hopes that, once informed about the project, visitors will support the work and accept that the noise of the aircraft is a small price to pay for the removal of rats and the return of many thousands breeding birds to the island. Access to the museum, church and cemetery will not be affected throughout the operational period. We expect that some visitors may even find the flying operations of interest.

It is important that Expedition Leaders and staff are well briefed in advance of flying operations commencing. Permit Holders and EL's will receive a GSGSSI briefing document which will provide concise details about the background to the project, what the SGHT aim to achieve, how EL's can ensure they avoid sites being baited, what visitors can expect to see and also how they can contribute towards the project.

In addition, all EL's and permit holders will also receive a Site Visitor Management Plan for Grytviken. This will follow the same format as the other 8 existing plans, but it will also include a special section detailing instructions for the management of passengers at Grytviken during the course of flying operations. Much of the southern half of the station will have to be closed to access during flying, though visitors will still be able to walk around the back of the station to access the church and museum, as was the case during the Grytviken major works in the past. The Zodiac landing sites in front of the cemetery and the museum will remain open and facilitate an alternative means of ferrying passengers from the cemetery to the museum (rather than on foot around the back of the station).

GSGSSI has been advised that yachts will still be able to access the Tijuca jetty, but this may need to re-examined prior to flights commencing.

The eradication project managers will need to make every effort to make good progress with bait dispersal during periods of good weather, but this will not prevent vessels from visiting Grytviken. It is clearly important though that landings do not take place in other areas that coincide with baiting operations.

Fortunately the first phase of the project covers areas that for the most part do not include approved visitor sites. The exceptions to this are the Maiviken to Grytviken walk, and the general vicinity of the area around Grytviken. To avoid any conflict with baiting operations, a flying programme will be updated on a daily basis by the project manager and this will be posted on the GSGSSI website. The Government Officers will also be briefed and will disseminate information as vessels approach an operational area. EL's will need to contact the duty GO to confirm their intentions and ascertain whether it is appropriate to proceed with landings and shore activities.

In the first phase of the project disruption of the nature will be minimal. Nevertheless GSGSSI is conscious that there will be considerable flying activity in some areas of the island and we regret any disturbance caused to visitors. Through thorough briefings by EL's and ship's staff as well as SGHT staff and Government Officers we hope that visitors will understand the importance of this project and fully support it.

In subsequent phases of the project vessel operators will be notified about proposed areas of operation prior to the IAATO Site Scheduler being opened for bookings. Visit applicants can then decide to avoid an area altogether, or remain flexible to adjust plans in relation to flying operations and other vessel movements as necessary. The protocol for checking the daily operational plan will be detailed in the information provided to EL's. If this works well in phase 1 then the same protocol will be extended into subsequent phases of operations.

BIOSECURITY

In recent years Biosecurity has been improved and good progress has been made. GSGSSI wishes to thank IAATO members for their support and efforts to implement this policy and the new protocols. Cargo arriving at KEP is now received into a secure facility for inspection, whilst visitors and base staff alike are better briefed and more vigilant than ever before.

Clearly biosecurity protocols in the future are going to be a key element in ensuring that every effort is made to prevent a re-introduction of a rodent to an area, which has been cleared of rats (and possibly mice). GSGSSI is preparing contingency plans that will enable staff on base and the Government patrol vessel to respond rapidly and hand bait any coastal areas, which may have been at risk of a rat re-introduction following an incident such as a vessel grounding. GSGSSI has also embarked on a training programme for Government Officers to enable them to inspect vessels more thoroughly and identify any signs of rodents. EL's attention will also be drawn again to the information provided last season, which helps identify the presence of mice at a site.

In recent years there have been a number of incidents involving rats boarding vessels, including a rat which last season managed to board a yacht from a line secured to the shore. Equally concerning was the report received a number of years ago concerning a rat, which managed to gain access to a beached Zodiac, in close proximity to a number of rat free islands. Given the tremendous significance of the rat eradication project, the ecological restoration of the island and the very substantial costs involved, every effort must be made by Government and all visitors to prevent a rat re-introduction. IAATO Members and other industry representatives will receive a document to discussing the biosecurity management options facing GSGSSI. This will consider whether vessels in future seasons will all need to be inspected on arrival at KEP, and whether vessels which have then been cleared may then need to proceed directly to rat free sites following their inspection and then not return to rat free landing sites once a landing has been made at any rat infested site. Another issue, which

needs to be addressed, concerns the GSGSSI actions in the event that an inspecting officer suspects a vessel has rodents on board.

The future management of reindeer is also inextricably linked to the rat eradication work. A public consultation document discussing this issue will be available very shortly. GSGSSI encourages IAATO members to study this and provide feedback for the consultation process.

One outstanding problem at Grytviken and KEP is the spread of the invasive plant, wavy bittercress. This has continued to spread behind the KEP base as well as on the lower reaches of Brown Mountain, despite a concerted effort by Government Officers and the South Atlantic Invasive Species project officer to spray the affected areas. This treatment has only had short-term results and the plant has been observed to recover from various herbicide treatments more quickly than other native species. Consequently, some large areas of ground are now closed to visitor access, in order to try and prevent the further spread of seeds. This closure information will be included in the Grytviken Site Visitor Management Plan. Access to the cemetery and Museum will not be affected. The GSGSSI Environmental Officer is currently working closely with other agencies overseas to formulate a strategy for the next phase of response to attempt to eradicate this plant.

HEAVY FUEL OIL

Following the recent IMO adoption of the amendment to MARPOL Annex 1 for the use and carriage of oils in the Antarctic Area (to come into force in August 2011), GSGSSI is undertaking a consultation exercise on the future use and carriage of Heavy Fuel Oil in SGSSI Territorial Waters. IAATO members should have received a copy of this consultation document from the IAATO Executive, though it is also available from the GSGSSI website.

GSGSSI is concerned about the scale of the environmental impact that an 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 endangered albatross species, which the Government is legally bound to protect. GSGSSI is also aware of the potential for vessels, which may in the future be excluded from the Antarctic, opting to transfer their operations to South Georgia waters.

The consultation considers the ramifications of an HFO ban for commercial operations, both fishing vessels and the cruise ship industry. Management options are considered. These include not implementing a ban in line with the MARPOL amendment, fully implementing a ban within SGSSI Territorial Waters or alternatively implementing the ban whilst facilitating some degree of limited access for HFO use and carriage in Cumberland East Bay over a limited time frame. This would enable some existing vessel operations time to make modifications in order to meet the requirements of a ban.

In March IAATO members were asked whether any HFO ban in South Georgia Territorial waters might affect their future operations. No response was received by the 15 May deadline. This is a second opportunity for IAATO members to raise this issue with GSGSSI.

In conjunction with this consultation, GSGSSI has been reviewing the Major Incident Plan for the Territory and will continue to work closely with the IAATO Executive on the relevant sections of this plan, which relate to cruise ship operations. The Government intends to run an internal tabletop exercise early next season.

PRION ISLAND

GSGSSI continues to support the albatross and petrel survey work undertaken on Albatross and Prion Islands by Sally Poncet and South Georgia Surveys. As well as the valuable long-term monitoring of breeding populations of birds, an important element of this survey in recent years has been monitoring for any impact on the breeding success of wandering albatross following the construction of the Prion Island visitor boardwalk and viewing platforms in 2007.

Observations to date suggest that the boardwalk has not had any impact on wandering albatross breeding success. For this reason GSGSSI has revised the code of conduct for visits to the site, in order to assist vessel operators during the occasional points in the season when South Georgia receives a number of vessels simultaneously and access to Prion Island is limited. Whilst the closure of the site during peak fur seal breeding 20 November – 7 January (inclusive) has not changed, the daily access at all other times has been extended to permit 2 Category 1 vessel visits, each for a maximum duration of 5 hours. EL's will need to study closely the revised code of conduct for the site. GSGSSI hopes that this will assist EL's greatly with site access (during the few periods in the season when access is an issue), without having any detrimental impact on the breeding birds. GSGSSI will continue to fund this survey work and will monitor the results closely for any signs of impact on albatross breeding success.

GENERAL POINTS

As mentioned above, the South Georgia Patagonian toothfish fishery was re-certified by the Marine Stewardship Council last year. This was the first fishery to be re-certified without any conditions. One fishing company, marketing the certified product, has suggested that South Georgia cruise operators should be aware of the possibilities for marketing MSC certified product directly to the cruise ship industry. If IAATO members would like details of the fishing operators marketing the MSC certified products then please contact GSGSSI.

GSGSSI is also considering selling batches of pre-stamped South Georgia postcards to IAATO vessels in advance of South Georgia visits. Vessels would then be able to sell these on to passengers whilst en route to South Georgia. Passengers would then be able to post these on arrival at Grytviken. GSGSSI

recognises that passengers only have a limited amount of time at Grytviken and this initiative would allow passengers more time to enjoy the museum and whaling station. If any operators are interested then I would ask them to contact GSGSSI and this can be arranged.

GSGSSI would again like to thank IAATO members for the opportunity to attend and address the annual meeting and for their assistance over the last year. If IAATO members have any questions or suggestions for GSGSSI then please do not hesitate to contact Richard McKee, exo@gov.gs .